# Naga

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# Rice field

The soil cracked beneath his bare heels, opening like dried lips under a cruel sky. Kerpal stood in the knee-high mire of his rice field, swatting mosquitoes off his neck with one hand while holding the worn rope of the plough with the other. The ox, a grey beast with ribs like bowstrings and flies nesting in its eye corners, stood motionless. Its tongue lolled out. The beast looked at nothing. No matter how many times Kerpal tugged or cursed, the animal did not move. There was nothing left in it to give. After a long pause, Kerpal yanked the rope with force and spat into the mud. The ox stumbled forward a few feet, then halted again. The plough let out a dull creak and split where the wooden shaft met the iron blade. He stared at it, fingers still clenched on the handle as if willing it back to life. Then he let go, slowly, and the half-broken tool dropped into the dirt with a soft splash, half-submerged already. A few mosquitoes clung to his temple, digging in silently. He slapped at them with muddy fingers, leaving thin black streaks down his cheek.

The field stretched all around him like a patient grave. No green. The rice seedlings were curled brown threads, scattered across the soft waterless ground like bones under a skin of dust. Overhead, the sun hung dull and white, offering heat without light. The paddies should've been singing with frogs and waist-high in water by now, but the canal hadn't brought anything for two weeks, and the village well was sinking fast. His own well — a shallow ring lined with cracked stones — gave just enough to wet his tongue and feed the ox. The last time he tried pulling two buckets from it, he'd only gotten half a pot. The rope burned his hands, and the pulley groaned as if the earth itself wanted him gone.

Kerpal turned from the field and walked back to his hut. His legs were coated in mosquito bites and dried mud. He could feel the heat radiating through the soles of his feet with every step. The house stood alone, a sloped roof of palm fronds sagging in the middle like a prayer forgotten mid-chant. The walls were straw and dung, patchy in places, and the bamboo mat that hung as a door fluttered weakly in the still air. Inside, the light dropped sharply, and the smell of old smoke, salt, and burnt lentils hovered like a film across the air. The floor was bare earth, patted down from years of footsteps, and marked with heel prints and the shapes of pots that once sat warm and full. In the center lay a pile of wood half-turned to ash from the last meal — two days ago.

His wife was crouched by the fire pit, poking the embers with a stick, her face sallow, mouth tight. She did not look up. A battered brass pot sat beside her, empty. A single onion lay on the mat. The cow had stopped giving milk. The mustard oil was gone.

"Water?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"You said you would bring some yesterday."

"I did. I drank it."

"I didn’t."

Her voice cracked but didn’t rise. She didn’t need to shout. Her hunger spoke from the way her eyes blinked too slowly. The child, their youngest, was asleep in the corner, curled on a flattened sack of jute. His ribs looked sharper every day.

Kerpal squatted by the wall and picked a pebble off the ground, tossing it toward a mosquito buzzing near the beam. It missed. The buzzing continued. There was nothing left to say. He knew every square foot of his land by heart, and now each inch of it mocked him. No gods had come, no rain had listened, and no neighbor would lend him a thing. He had debts in the village. The moneylender passed by last week and coughed loudly outside the gate without coming in. Kerpal knew what that meant. The next time he’d come with a man from the Company and a piece of paper.

Outside, the ox bellowed once — a tired, ugly sound — and went silent again.

The road to the village lay like a thin vein through the dry grass, winding past silent trees and thorny hedges that hadn’t seen rain in weeks. Kerpal walked it slowly, sandals slapping against the dust, the weight of nothing in his hands. The sun had begun to tilt west, turning everything in its path to brittle gold. His stomach felt like an empty sack beaten against stone, and his legs ached with that hollow fatigue born of hunger, not work.

He reached the village by late afternoon. Dogs slept under the steps of the tea stall, their ribs ticking under flies. A group of boys kicked a dry mango pit between them with lazy aim. No one called out to him. He passed the blacksmith’s, then the tailor’s, and finally stopped in front of a shop with faded blue shutters and a small pile of clay pots by the entrance. His friend Dinesh sat inside, cross-legged on a mat, eating quietly — roti, onion, and a smudge of tamarind paste.

“Dinesh,” Kerpal said, stepping into the shade. “You have a spare bread?”

Dinesh looked up. “You eaten today?”

Kerpal didn’t answer. Dinesh broke the bread in half, then hesitated and gave the whole thing instead.

“I’ll remember,” Kerpal said. “When the rain comes and the gods wake up, I’ll bring you back ten.”

“If the gods wake up,” Dinesh muttered. “You’ll owe me twenty.”

Kerpal smiled for the first time in days — a crooked pull of his cheek. He tucked the bread into his shawl and walked home fast, as if the food might vanish from his hands if he lingered too long. Back at the hut, the fire was dead and the pot still empty. His wife looked up as he entered and her eyes fell on the bread. She didn't speak. She took it, tore it in two, and gave half to their son, who ate like he was afraid someone might take it back.

Kerpal sat down and wiped sweat from his neck. Then he spoke.

"This rice-growing... is horse shit."

His wife looked at him.

"No water. Field dry. Ox won't move. Mosquitoes drink more blood than the crop gets."

She chewed slowly. He went on.

"Turmeric doesn't yield anything. Sells for crumbs. We work like animals and get fed like dogs."

She didn't argue. There was nothing left to say. They'd spoken through these same walls so many times the words had worn ruts in the air.

"I'm done," he said. "I remember some fellow in the market once — said poppy. Said it brings in coin. Good coin. Said you don't need to grow much. Said buyers come on their own. I should've listened then."

"Poppy?" she asked, brows tight. "That's... not allowed."

He waved his hand.

"What's allowed? Starving? Digging cracks with our hands and feeding our child dust? I'll sell the ox. Buy seed. Enough to live till harvest and tools to cook it into gum. You'll see."

He stood, took a long look at the ox through the window — the beast stood chewing nothing, head low, eyes glazed — and pulled a rope from the wall. As he stepped outside, his wife called after him.

"If the Company finds out—"

"They can come sit in the field and eat mud with me, then."

The village market was fuller than he liked. Cows wandered between stalls, their horns wrapped in cloth strips. Men bartered over vegetables, shouting over each other with thin-lipped smiles. Kerpal led the ox through the crowd like a tired bridegroom dragging his own wedding cart. He found a spot near the grain seller's stall and tied the animal to a post.

"Big beast for sale!" he called. "Strong as five horses! Pulls like a demon, eats like a bird. Quiet nature, perfect for lone work."

A few men gathered. One old fellow with a cloud of white hair lifted the beast's lip and inspected the teeth.

"Looks half-dead."

"Looks quiet," Kerpal said. "And it still works. My field's cursed, not the ox. This beast'll make you rich if you know how to hold a plough."

"What's wrong with it then?"

"I'm broke. That's all."

A younger man, perhaps a moneylender's cousin by the gold-threaded scarf he wore, stepped closer. "Two hundred rupees."

"Make it three-fifty."

"Two-fifty."

"Three hundred and it's yours. Otherwise I feed it to the gods."

The man studied him. Then spat sideways.

"Fine. Three hundred."

Kerpal nodded. They shook hands. The man handed over the crumpled notes, counted once. Kerpal tucked them into his waistband, untied the ox, and gave the rope over without a word. He didn't look at the beast again.

Three hundred rupees. Enough to feed them for a year, if carefully spent. Enough to begin.

The sun had started to dip when Kerpal reached the western edge of the market, where the real trade happened — not from stalls, but through words passed in narrow alleys and quiet handshakes under thatched awnings. He spotted the man he'd been told about — lean, dusky skin, a copper ring in his left ear, sitting cross-legged on a wooden crate, chewing betel and spitting red strings into the dust. They said he knew someone who dealt in seed — not millet, not mustard, but the kind of seed men whispered about when the tax collector had gone.

Kerpal stepped closer.

"You're Ramu, no?"

The man looked up. His eyes were small and sharp.

"Who's asking?"

"Kerpal. I've got coin. I'm looking for poppy."

A pause, then Ramu wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and stood.

“Come.”

They walked past the sugar stall, past the old banyan stump where beggars sat wrapped in blankets, and out the north side of the village. The path bent between scrub trees and low ridges. After a while, the huts grew farther apart. They passed a small shrine with a broken idol, its face half-eaten by moss. Finally, they reached a barn standing beside a fenced field. The wood was old but strong, painted with cow dung and sun-faded red symbols — a crude serpent curled around a trident.

Ramu knocked once. A tall man Arjun opened the door. His beard was streaked with white, but his back was straight as a pole.

“This one wants seed,” Ramu said.

The man nodded and stepped aside.

“Come in.”

Inside the barn, a single oil lamp flickered. Tools hung on hooks — iron scoops, wooden spatulas, scrapers stained brown. In one corner lay a giant sack tied with rope. The scent in the air was strange — sweet, heavy, with something sharp beneath it, like rot waiting its turn.

The man crouched by the sack and loosened the rope. Inside: black seeds, tiny, countless.

“Raj poppy,” Arjun said. “Grows best in dry winters. November you plant. By February the pods come. March—” he snapped his fingers. “You lance. Cut shallow. Morning cut, afternoon bleed. Sap dries white. You scrape it next day.”

Kerpal leaned in, eyes focused.

“Too deep a cut, it dies. Too late, no sap. It’s not grain. It’s a spirit.”

He walked over to the wall and picked up a scraper.

“This you use to cut. Then let dry. Press into balls, then bricks. You wrap in banana leaf, press with stone, leave for one night in warm place. No smoke until dry. No sell until dark.”

Kerpal nodded slowly.

“How many days to sprout?”

“If the soil’s honest—eight days.”

Kerpal pulled the coin from his waistband and held it out.

“I want enough for one bigha.”

Arjun laughed. “One? How much land you have?”

“Six bighas. I’ll start with four. Let the gods see my hand.”

“You’re not afraid?”

“I’m afraid of hunger.”

He counted the seed out in a smaller bag, but Kerpal wanted the full sack. They settled the coin, and Kerpal hoisted the load onto his shoulders with a grunt, nodding thanks.

Outside, the sky was violet. Crickets sang in the grass.

“Next year,” Arjun called after him, “you’ll come back with silver teeth.”

Kerpal walked home fast. The weight on his back was not heavy — it felt like something alive.

At home, he dropped the sack inside the doorway and stood panting. His wife looked up from where she sat grinding lentil husks.

“Seed,” he said. “For a real crop.”

She rose, brushed her hands clean. “How much land?”

“All we’ve got.”

The next day they started early. Kerpal pulled the old roots out of the turmeric patch, yanked dried rice stalks by the handful, and dug out stones with a pickaxe tied together from broken tools. His wife followed with a sickle, slashing low grass and hauling bundles out of the way. For a week, they worked from sun to dusk. Even the child helped, fetching water and keeping crows away. When blisters formed on their hands, they tied strips of cloth around their fingers and kept going.

By the second week of November, the field was ready. Kerpal stood on the edge and looked out. Nearly four full bighas. The soil was soft and dark from the ash they mixed in. He walked the rows barefoot, casting handfuls of seed in a careful spread, lips moving soundlessly with each toss. His wife followed with a bamboo rake, pressing the seeds gently into the earth.

Two days later, Kerpal took the shovel and climbed into the well. The rope creaked as he lowered himself. The bottom was dry mud, cracked and old. He dug for hours, his back screaming with every lift. Above, his wife pulled the buckets up and dumped them beside the hut. Once, he slipped and fell against the stones, gasping — but didn’t stop.

By the third day, water began to appear — first as a trickle, then spreading slowly around his ankles. He dropped the shovel and stood still, watching it rise.

He shouted up.

“Pull me out!”

When he climbed out, soaked to the knees, he was smiling like a madman.

“There’ll be water now,” he said. “Enough to feed the ghosts under this land.”

His wife said nothing. She touched his face and wiped the mud from his cheek.

The wheels of the hand cart screeched as Kerpal dragged it over the rutted path, a dull song of rust and effort echoing behind him. The early light cut slantwise through the mist, revealing dew-laced cobwebs clinging to fence posts and the brittle skeletons of last season’s brush. He reached Arjun’s barn before the sun had fully climbed. Arjun was already there, squatting near a stack of drying racks, rubbing oil into his palms.

“You again?” Arjun said, not looking up.

“I came for the tools. The kind you said I’d need if the gods are kind.”

Arjun stood, nodded once, and led him around back. There, in a narrow lean-to, were a set of well-used but intact tools: curved lancers for slicing the pods, wide-mouthed trays for drying, round-bottomed pots for thickening the sap, wooden presses, spatulas, and stones for kneading.

“Not much,” Arjun said. “But honest work doesn’t need more than this. You take care of the timing, not the tool.”

Kerpal counted his coins and handed them over, without bargaining. He loaded the cart carefully, wrapping the blades in straw and tying the heavier pieces down with rope. As he turned to leave, Arjun leaned against the doorframe, chewing a twig.

“If the sap’s white, you’re doing it right. If it’s red—leave it be. The pod’s gone bitter.”

Kerpal nodded. “When it’s time, I’ll be gentle. Like milking a shy cow.”

On the way back, he stopped at Dinesh’s shop. The man was sipping tea, watching the village stir.

“Your coin,” Kerpal said, holding out a folded note.

Dinesh raised an eyebrow. “I thought you were a farmer.”

“Was,” Kerpal said. “Now I grow dreams.”

Back home, he found his wife washing lentils with half a pot of water.

He dropped the bundle of money beside her mat.

“Buy rice. Salt. Lentils. Ghee if there’s enough. ”

Time moved, dragging its feet through the slow turn of winter. January passed in shivering dawns and dry noons. By late month, the first blossoms opened in the fields like secrets — red, pink, white — swaying on pale green stems. The sight stopped Kerpal in his tracks. He stood among them, arms at his sides, face lifted to the morning sun.

He spent each day among the plants, walking the rows barefoot, speaking to them.

“Grow strong, my friends,” he whispered, kneeling beside the taller ones. “You carry my days on your backs.”

When he had enough manure from the cow shed, he dug it into the soil between the plants with a flat stick, careful not to touch the roots. The field grew silent and steady. His wife joined him in the early hours, carrying water, clearing weeds, watching for pests. Sometimes, when a breeze passed, the field bent as one body, whispering back.

In March, the blossoms fell away and the seed pods began to swell — small, round, firm. Kerpal crouched beside them daily, pressing the tips with his thumb, waiting for the right tension. Too early, and the sap would be thin. Too late, and the pod would stiffen like bone.

He waited.

By the second week of April, the first cut was made. Kerpal held the pod between two fingers and drew the curved blade slowly across its skin. A pale, milky tear formed, thick and slow. He did not speak, but nodded. The next day, the sap had dried brown, and he scraped it into a bowl lined with leaves.

Each day brought more cuts. He and his wife moved down the rows, working at dawn and dusk. In the afternoons, they dried the sap in shaded trays, letting the wind thicken it. He visited Arjun twice that month, asking about the color, the smell, the time between cut and scrape.

“Does it smell like rotting mango?” Kerpal once asked.

“Then it’s too wet,” Arjun said. “Dry it again. Sun, but not full.”

Kerpal prayed at night. Sometimes he whispered under his breath as he worked.

“Not for gold, not for pride,” he said one morning, pressing his hand to a pod, “just let me keep my land.”

By late May, the sap had thickened into a tar-like mass. He warmed it gently over a fire, turning it with a spatula until it formed dark, fragrant lumps. The smell filled the hut, clinging to the roof beams, thick and bitter. He kneaded the warm lumps on a wooden board, pressing them into round bricks with a flat stone. His wife rubbed oil into her palms and shaped smaller balls, wrapping them in leaves and tying them with string.

The room was silent but full — of scent, of breath, of held hope.

He held up one brick, still soft.

“If this sells,” he said quietly, “we’ll eat like kings. But not today.”

“No,” she said, wiping her hands. “Today we finish the batch.”

They worked late into the night, the fire low, their shadows stretching across the walls like the arms of people they used to be.

The bricks lay cooling in a neat mound inside the hut, stacked one on another like dark loaves left to rest. The smell was thick — sweet and bitter and clinging to the back of the throat. Kerpal crouched beside the pile, his hands blackened with resin, and began placing the bricks carefully into a wooden crate. Each layer he lined with dried leaves and cloth scraps. His wife helped until her arms trembled, then sat back against the wall, eyes half-closed. They hadn’t eaten properly in two days.

Kerpal shut the lid of the crate with a loud clack, tied it down with rope, then sat beside it, breathing heavily. His wife had already slumped onto the mat, her head resting on a folded shawl. Outside, a dog barked somewhere distant. The wind carried dust.

He rummaged under the cot and took out the small clay pipe Arjun had given him along with the seed. He broke a bit off a brick, soft and warm still, rolled it between his fingers and packed it into the bowl. When he lit it, the fire flared and hissed faintly, and soon the room filled with thick curls of smoke.

Kerpal leaned back against the wall, eyes unfocused, the pipe balanced between his fingers. His chest rose slowly.

“Good...” he muttered, a smile spreading across his face. “You sweet black bastard...”

Visions crept like shadows behind his eyelids — fields swaying under a red sun, gods dancing in spirals, a serpent coiling around the mountain, whispering his name. He heard music he couldn’t place, felt weightless. The fire crackled, or maybe it was something else. He drifted. He smiled.

When he opened his eyes again, dawn was pushing its light through the bamboo walls. His wife was snoring quietly. The crate stood ready. He stood, shook the heaviness from his

limbs, and loaded the crate onto the hand cart. His legs still felt strange — soft, slow — but he walked.

The road was long and cut through low scrub hills, patches of farmland, and the occasional shrine under a peepal tree. He chewed on roasted lentils from a pouch to stay awake. By midmorning, he reached the market town where the East India Company held its auctions. The place buzzed like a kicked hive — carts lined with chests, oxen tethered to trees, men shouting, measuring, loading. The ground was scuffed with hundreds of feet. Everything smelled of sweat, dust, oil, and faint traces of opium.

Kerpal found an open space and set his crate down. A tall white man in linen vest and pith helmet came over, followed by two Bengali clerks carrying notebooks.

The man squinted at him.

“Only one chest?” he said, half-laughing.

Kerpal, still sluggish from the smoke, blinked. “How much?”

The Brit knelt, cut a slice from the top brick with a brass tool, sniffed it, rubbed it between his fingers, licked a bit. His nose wrinkled. Then he shrugged.

“Decent. Fresh cut. Could be thicker,” he said. “Two hundred seventy rupees.”

Kerpal nodded slowly. “Alright.”

The clerk scribbled. Coins were handed over — thick rupee notes and a few silvers. Kerpal held them, counting with black-stained fingers. It felt nearly as heavy as the price of the ox months ago. He tucked it into his waistband, nodded again, and walked away with an odd pride in his step.

Later, in the shade of Arjun’s barn, he told the story. Arjun was stirring something in a shallow bowl, his shirt open and streaked with resin. When Kerpal finished, Arjun laughed so hard he nearly dropped the pot.

“You fool!” he cried. “You thick-skulled buffalo!”

Kerpal frowned. “What?”

“One chest? At Company auction? For 270? That bastard shaved you raw.”

“I got nearly as much as the ox—”

“You could’ve gotten double, maybe more! They pay four hundred easy. Sometimes six. Depends on the cut. Depends on the smell. You went there smelling like the pipe.”

Kerpal blinked. “They laughed at me, yes.”

“They laugh because you smell like smoke and desperation, and they know you'll take any coin they throw at you.”

Kerpal cursed, slapped his thigh. “Damn it. I should’ve come to you first.”

Arjun shook his head, still grinning. “You’re lucky they didn’t give you colored paper and tell you it was silver.”

Kerpal wiped his face and stared at the rafters.

“I’ll not sell to those maggot Brits anymore. Thieves in uniforms, that’s what they are. I need to figure out how to get to Bhutan.”

Arjun’s eyes gleamed. “That’s more like it.”

Kerpal leaned in. “Do they buy there?”

“They buy like devils buy souls,” Arjun said. “Chinese traders, merchants, monks with silver jars, even kings behind curtains. A chest can fetch two hundred, two fifty pounds sterling in China. You take it east — prices rise with the sun.”

Kerpal’s mouth hung open. “Sterling?”

“Yes. Not rupees. Pounds. It walks like gold.”

“So how?”

Arjun shrugged. “Long road. Through Nepal, or Bhutan. Hills, snow, taxes, bribes, bad paths, worse men.”

Kerpal folded his arms. “I’ll go. I’ll find the road.”

Arjun smirked. “No you won’t. Not with that cart and those legs.”

Kerpal narrowed his eyes. “What then?”

“First,” Arjun said, pointing at him with a stained finger, “you buy a horse.”

Arjun sat on a stack of empty seed sacks, pulling at a lump of dried gum with the corner of a scraper. The light outside was sharp and white, and flies moved lazily through it. Kerpal squatted in front of him, still clutching the money from the sale, his head buzzing not from opium this time but from anger and plans.

“Tell me where,” Kerpal said. “Names. Roads. Buyers. I need to know who pays real coin.”

Arjun tossed the lump into a tin tray and wiped his hands on his dhoti.

“You go northeast. Bhutan. Not the border villages. Deeper.”

“Where?”

“First stop: Samdrup Jongkhar. That’s the gate. There’s a man there, name is Sang Lo. Half-Chinese, half-Bhutanese. He trades jade and salt but also moves opium. He’ll test your bricks. If they’re good, he buys fast.”

Kerpal leaned in. “Then?”

“From there, you move up to Trashigang. The mountain roads are worse, but the buyers there pay better. Monks, traders from Lhasa, even Company men under fake names. One Chinese man — Mr. Zhu Guo — tall, old, always in blue coat. You find him in the market square near the prayer wheel. He pays in sterling, no questions.”

Kerpal’s eyes gleamed.

“There’s one more,” Arjun said, lowering his voice. “Punakha. The royal winter capital. They don’t speak much, but if you reach there with clean product, you’ll come back with silver you never touched before.”

Kerpal stood slowly, the plan forming behind his eyes like a shadow with edges.

“I need a horse.”

“Not just a horse. A good one. Strong, mountain legs. And wheels that don’t cry on the first stone.”

Kerpal left with the names burning in his head. He walked straight to the market, where traders and animal handlers gathered near the grain pits. The sun had risen high. The smell of hay, dung, sweat, and iron clung to the place. He moved from one seller to another, watching the horses, speaking few words, inspecting wheels with his hand — the grain, the bolts, the smell of the wood.

One man showed him a painted cart that creaked too much. Another had a horse with watery eyes and a limp. He kept looking. After three hours, his sandals covered in dust and his throat dry, he found a broad-chested roan horse tethered behind a grain merchant’s stall. It pawed at the earth and snorted as he approached.

“What’s his name?” Kerpal asked.

The seller scratched his ear. “No name. He’s a worker.”

Kerpal ran his hand along the neck. The muscle was solid. The legs firm. The eyes clear.

“And the cart?”

“Old wood. Fixed. New axle.”

Kerpal nodded. “How much?”

The seller named a number too high. Kerpal laughed. “Is he a king’s horse? Does he come with a gold saddle?”

They haggled for twenty minutes, voice rising, hands waving. Kerpal stepped away twice, only to be called back with a lower price each time. In the end, they settled on a fair amount — enough to sting, but not enough to regret.

He tied the horse to a post, hitched the cart behind it, and climbed on. The reins felt strange in his hands — light, yet full of power. He tapped his heel and the horse started forward, hooves thudding against the road like drums rolling under his spine.

By late afternoon, he returned home. The hut stood in shadow now, his wife Nira squatting by the stove, washing rice with water poured carefully from a half-full pot.

She stood as he approached.

“You bought a horse,” she said.

“A horse and cart,” he replied. “We ride east.”

She frowned. “Where east?”

“Bhutan. Beyond the hills. Past the border. I’ve been hoaxed, Nira. The Company paid me like a beggar. One chest sold for 270 rupees. Arjun says real traders pay double. And further east, in China... sterling.”

Her mouth tightened. “How long?”

“Months. But worth it. I’ve time — six months till planting. I’ll be back before then. We’ll have enough to dig a second well, fix the roof, send our boy to school in Buxar if you want.”

She was quiet for a moment, hands wet, eyes fixed on him.

“Will you be safe?”

“As safe as any man carrying twenty chests of temptation.”

He reached into his waistband and handed her a wad of rupees.

“Food. Oil. Firewood. Keep things warm. I’ve packed the bricks. Twenty crates. They’ll go on the cart. I’ll leave in two days.”

She nodded slowly. “I’ll cook your meals for the road.”

He touched her cheek.

“And I’ll come back,” he said. “With more than promises.”

## Bhutan

The morning he left, the sky was grey with a soft drizzle falling like memory on the rooftops. Kerpal tied the last knot over the wagon's canvas sheet and pulled the rope hard with both hands until it bit into his palms. The twenty crates were loaded snugly—each wrapped in cloth and stacked with care so the wheels bore the weight evenly. The cart leaned forward with the mass, and the roan horse shifted under its yoke, sensing the burden of what lay ahead.

Inside the hut, Nira stood folding dry lentil cakes into a cloth pouch. She had already packed rice, some salt, onions, dried tamarind, a clay pot of ghee, and gur wrapped in leaves. She handed him the food bundle without a word, then reached behind the stove and unhooked a knife with a heavy bone handle, wide as his forearm and worn smooth from use.

"You'll need this," she said.

Kerpal took it and slid it into the side pocket of his satchel, securing the flap. The blade's weight was comforting.

He stepped outside and untied the horse. Rain ran down the side of his turban. Nira followed, standing at the edge of the threshold, arms folded tight against the morning chill.

"I'll follow the Ganges northeast, cross past Purnia," he said. "From there, to the border."

She looked at the cart. "You'll eat properly?"

"I've got enough to chew on for two weeks, and if not—I'll buy or steal."

He paused, searching her face.

"Don't worry if you don't hear anything. Roads eat news."

She nodded, face firm but pale.

He climbed onto the cart's plank seat and took the reins. The horse stirred, then began moving with slow certainty, hooves kicking up wet dirt. As he passed the edge of the field, he looked back once. Nira still stood there, not waving, not calling. Just watching. Like someone measuring a distance they already understood.

By the first evening, Kerpal reached the edge of Begusarai, stopping under a banyan tree beside a dried canal. He laid down a cloth, made a small fire, and boiled some rice with salt. He ate in silence while the horse chewed sugarcane bark, steam rising from its back. He slept beside the cart, one eye half open, the knife under his arm.

The road was slow, rutted and cracked. Villagers passed him in twos and threes—traders carrying baskets, women returning from market, Company riders with rifles slung loose. He

kept his head down, nodded when necessary, and moved. His face had changed. He no longer looked like a farmer. The opium had crept into his skin, behind his eyes, under his nails.

By the second day, he crossed the plains near Khagaria and reached Saharsa by dusk. The town buzzed with noise: sellers hawking pots, boys chasing pigs, men with ledgers shouting at one another through clouds of bidi smoke. Kerpal stopped near a grain depot and bought chickpeas and a jug of buttermilk, then watered the horse at a public trough. No one looked at him twice. Just another trader, another man with crates and a cart. He liked it that way.

He slept near a burned-down roadside temple that night, the ashes still fragrant with old camphor and ghee. The crates sat quiet behind him. He touched the knife once before sleeping, pressing the flat of the blade against his chest like a prayer.

Kerpal rose before dawn and walked the cart toward Chandika Sthan, the wheels muttering against the stones as if complaining about being woken too early. The temple stood low and old, its bricks darkened by centuries of smoke and rain, its courtyard quiet except for crows picking at yesterday's offerings. He tied the horse beneath a neem tree and stepped inside barefoot, the stone cold under his soles. The air smelled of oil lamps and damp flowers. He knelt, pressed his forehead to the floor, and stayed there longer than he intended, listening to his breath slow. When he rose, he took out the pipe, pinched a small piece from a brick wrapped in cloth, and lit it in the shadow beside the sanctum. The smoke curled thick and patient. His eyes softened. "Watch the road," he murmured, not sure which god he meant. "Watch my hands."

He left Saharsa with the sun climbing, the land opening into long stretches of scrub and fallow fields. Madhepura came and went in a haze of dust and voices. He did not stop long there. By late afternoon he reached Raniganj, where an old temple leaned against time like a tired man against a wall. A serpent was carved into one of the pillars, its body coiled tight, hood flared, stone eyes worn smooth by touch. Kerpal felt it before he thought it. He tied the horse, sat beneath a peepal tree, and packed the pipe again. The smoke came faster this time, thicker, settling in his chest and behind his eyes. He watched the serpent and felt watched back.

A man appeared from the shade, barefoot, hair tied in a knot, ash smeared across his forearms. He nodded once and squatted nearby. "Brother," he said softly, "may I share?"

Kerpal handed him the pipe without a word. The man drew once, then again, and on the third pull he coughed, laughed, and wiped his eyes. "By the coils," he said, breathless. "This is the strongest I have known. It bites and then it sings."

Kerpal watched him. "It grows honest if you're patient."

The man stared at the serpent on the pillar. “This is a sign,” he said. “Nāga does not waste breath. Where did you learn this?”

“From the soil,” Kerpal said. “And from listening.”

The man nodded as if that settled it. “The Nāga are older than kings,” he said. “They sleep under rivers and hills. When they wake, they teach in smoke and dream. In the old stories, they guard treasure, not gold, but passage. Those who carry their breath walk roads others cannot see.”

Kerpal felt the words settle into him like stones dropped into water. “Where do they listen?”

“North,” the man said. “Where the forests thicken and the rains remember their names. There is a temple near Jalpaiguri. Old caretakers. Quiet people. They keep the rites when others forget. They would want this—” he tapped the pipe gently, “—for sacred nights. Not for trade. For asking.”

Kerpal leaned back against the tree, eyes half-closed. “What do they ask?”

The man smiled, a thin line. “Safe crossings. Forgiveness. Strength for hands that must do hard things.”

Kerpal stood, shook the ash from the pipe, and tied it away. “I’ll go there,” he said. “If the road allows.”

“The road allows what it chooses,” the man replied, rising. “But the Nāga favors those who do not lie to themselves.”

They parted without names. Kerpal climbed onto the cart as the light thinned and rolled on, the serpent’s stone eyes following him until the bend swallowed the temple and the road ahead grew quiet again.

The road narrowed between low embankments, where pools of old rain sat unmoving like forgotten breath. Kerpal kept the cart steady, shifting his weight as the wagon groaned beneath him. The clouds were thick above, but the air held its rain like a held cry. The horse moved with steady rhythm, tail flicking, shoulders dark with sweat.

Up ahead, a figure stood by the roadside—an old man in a soaked dhoti, leaning on a stick. He waved as Kerpal neared. Kerpal slowed.

“Where you going, uncle?” he called out.

“Just a few miles ahead,” the man said, voice hoarse. “My feet are tired. My field drowned last week. The Ganges took it all. I’ve eaten nothing warm in two days.”

Kerpal nodded once. “Climb up.”

The old man climbed onto the wagon with effort, settling against a sack. Kerpal passed him a folded chapati and a boiled potato wrapped in cloth, then pulled a few coins from the folds of his sash.

“Take it,” he said. “No gods are feeding us. We’ve got to feed each other.”

The old man chewed slowly. “You're good,” he said. “You’re not from these roads.”

“I’m from where the land cracks instead of floods.”

After some hours of quiet travel, the old man patted Kerpal’s shoulder. “I’ll walk from here.”

He climbed down slowly, clutching the stick and food pouch, and waved once before vanishing into a grove of banana trees.

Kerpal rode on until a strange cluster of stalls appeared by a bend in the road. Old canvas tarps sagged over crooked tables. A dozen mismatched objects lay on display—beaten kettles, cracked samovars, bracelets, brass gods with broken limbs. But something else caught his eye: a curved sword with a horn handle, its blade dull but whole, resting among the junk.

He dismounted and picked it up. It had weight. The edge was blunt, but the balance was right. He turned to the vendor, a man with sunken eyes and a beard full of dust.

“How much for this one?”

“Fifteen.”

Kerpal grunted. “Ten. And I want a belt for it.”

The man hesitated, then reached under the table and pulled out a leather belt, cracked but usable.

“Done.”

Kerpal gave the rupees, slung the belt over his shoulder, and tied the sword to his hip. It hung at his side with quiet promise. He also bought a large sack of oats, loading it onto the wagon’s rear board. The horse snorted when he returned, catching the scent.

He moved on. By late afternoon, the clouds finally opened. Rain fell hard and fast, drumming the cart, turning the path into mud. The wheels slid, the axles groaned, and soon the cart halted with a wet crunch.

Kerpal cursed, jumped down into knee-deep muck, and pressed his shoulder to the back of the cart. It didn’t budge. Rain poured down his back, soaking his turban and tunic. He pressed harder, gritting his teeth, digging his heels in. The horse turned its head, snorting and stamping.

“Come on, damn you,” he muttered, shoving again. “Don’t sink on me now.”

After half an hour of shoving, rocking, and pulling at the wheels with his bare hands, the cart finally lurched free. Mud clung to his legs, and his arms burned. He climbed back onto the wagon, panting, and reached for the oat sack.

He poured a heap into the wooden trough by the horse’s neck.

“Eat, friend,” he said. “You pulled me through.”

Night fell soon after, the rain softening into mist. Kerpal pulled the cart under a stand of trees, tied the horse to a low branch, and made a small fire from what dry twigs he could gather. He laid his wet shawl on the cart, leaned back, and watched the sky through the leaves.

“First the Company cheats me,” he muttered, closing his eyes, “now the mud wants my bones. Let’s see what Bhutan has to say.”

He fell asleep with the sword against his hip and the fire crackling low, his dreams blurred with smoke and serpents.

## Temple

The sky above Jalpaiguri was thick with mist when Kerpal rode into the town. The forest had crept closer to the road as he traveled, and now the trees pressed in like silent watchers, their wet leaves whispering in the morning breeze. His clothes were damp, his boots crusted with layers of road and mud, and the wagon creaked with the weight of the crates behind him. The horse moved slow but steady, the smell of its sweat mixing with the earth.

He asked around, always in a quiet tone. “Naga temple,” he said to an old woman by the well. “Sacred place. A man on the road said there’s one here.” She had nodded, not looking up, and pointed east, past the timber yard and into the woods where the land sloped and fog gathered like folded cloth.

By afternoon, he found it — half-eaten by vines and lichen, the stone temple stood low and wide, flanked by carved serpent statues with open mouths and moss-grown eyes. He dismounted, tethered the horse to a fig tree, and stepped into the cold interior. A smoky scent lingered, not from firewood but from oils and incense older than memory. Torches flickered on the walls, unguarded.

He walked to the center of the hall, where an altar with Naga god statue lay bare and low.

“I was sent here,” he said aloud. “A man by the temple in Raniganj. Said there might be those here who… want poppy. Sacred use.”

From the shadows, a man emerged — old, with deep lines carved into his face like dried riverbeds. His robe was dark red, the hem dusted with ash. His eyes held the stillness of someone who had not rushed in years.

“I am Divit,” he said. “Show me what you carry.”

Kerpal stepped forward, unwrapped a brick, and handed it over. Divit broke a small piece with a nail, crumbled it into a clay bowl, packed it into a long-stemmed pipe, and lit it with a small coal from a nearby lamp.

He inhaled once, twice — then began coughing violently. His eyes watered.

Kerpal said nothing.

The coughing eased. Divit’s shoulders relaxed. His voice, when it returned, was soft and distant. “This… is no field’s edge opium. This is born from something deeper.”

He smiled without teeth.

“I’ll take four bricks,” he said. “Two gold nuggets.”

Kerpal pulled the bricks from his satchel and handed them over. Divit turned and from his robe produced a cloth pouch. He opened it slowly and dropped two solid nuggets of raw gold into Kerpal’s hand. The weight surprised him.

“Come,” the old man said.

They moved through a doorway behind the altar, down a narrow stone stairwell that curved slowly into the earth. Torches lit the path — each held in a serpent’s jaw carved into the wall. The deeper they went, the air grew colder, heavier, and the silence turned dense, as though carrying a weight of breath long held.

They reached a chamber. Four pillars stood there, each wrapped with coiling serpent sculptures, mouths open, tongues flicked in stone. At the far end, an altar sat low, with five lit candles and a blackened copper bowl.

Divit gestured to a large woven carpet laid out before the altar. He sat cross-legged and motioned for Kerpal to join him.

Kerpal sat. Divit unwrapped a lump of opium and passed it.

“Smoke this,” he said. “Let them see you.”

Kerpal packed the bowl with care, lit it with a trembling hand, and inhaled. The smoke curled into him like a thread sliding through cloth. It burned slightly, then settled deep.

Divit began to chant in a low voice — syllables that didn’t match any language Kerpal had heard. The sound echoed strangely, bouncing from pillar to wall and back, folding on itself.

Kerpal blinked.

Then he saw.

A golden field stretched in front of him, swaying under a sky of rolling smoke. From the far side, a serpent slithered through the stalks, long as a road, its scales glinting like coins dipped in blood. It rose up, eyes huge and unblinking, and whispered his name.

Kerpal.

The wind bent as it passed. He felt it touch his chest, his arms, the back of his neck. He wanted to run. He could not move.

The voice whispered again.

Kerpal.

Then others began to appear—faces in the smoke, scaled hands reaching through the air, cities made of bone and brass, rivers of black water coursing under mountains of ash.

He opened his mouth but made no sound. He sat still, breath shallow, the pipe forgotten in his hand.

Divit's voice broke the silence.

"You are seen now."

Kerpal looked at him, eyes wide.

"They came."

"Yes," Divit said. "You're marked."

"What was that?"

"Not vision," the old man said. "Manifestation. The spirits that slither under the skin of the world. The Cult of Naga has known them for four thousand years. They were worshipped before cities were built. Before rain had a name. Poppy is how we speak to them. Not all who smoke hear. Not all who hear are meant to live."

Kerpal sat silent. The room pulsed.

Divit looked at him with a gaze that pierced through bone.

"You've been called. Or cursed. The difference is not for you to know yet."

Kerpal stared into the candlelight, still hearing his name whispered from somewhere far beneath the stone.

Divit sat very still on the carpet, the chant fading until only the torches spoke, their flames whispering against the stone. He reached for a pinch of ash, drew a slow line on the floor, then began to speak as if continuing something already started long ago.

“There was a time,” he said, “when the devas and the asuras agreed on one thing only: they wanted Amṛta, the honey that does not rot, the drink that keeps the breath from thinning.” He lifted his hand, palm open. “They chose the Sea of Milk, and they chose to churn it like butter, as farmers do when they want fat from thinness.”

Kerpal watched the ash line blur and settle. His chest felt warm, heavy. “They needed a rod,” Divit went on. “Mandara Mountain. The devas went first. They strained and sang and bled from the hands, but the mountain did not move. The asuras tried after them. Same sweat, same failure. Then the Bhūtagaṇas, the guards of Śiva, came with iron breath and dead eyes. They pushed. Nothing.”

Divit’s voice did not rise. It pressed.

“Viṣṇu spoke then. He sent Garuḍa.”

Kerpal blinked. The torchlight bent. For a moment Divit’s shoulders seemed too narrow for his robe, his spine arching subtly, the skin along his neck shimmering like scales. Kerpal swallowed. “It’s the smoke,” he thought. “Just the smoke.”

“Garuḍa flew,” Divit said, “and Mandara came up as easily as a frog from grass. The mountain obeyed him. Pride swelled his wings.” Divit’s mouth curved into something like a smile, then did not. “But a rod is useless without a rope. Vāsuki was needed.”

Kerpal’s eyes drifted to the serpent pillars. The stone coils seemed tighter now.

“The devas tried to bring Vāsuki. The gandharvas tried. None could. Garuḍa went then to the city of the nāgas and spoke with the speed he loved so much. Vāsuki said, ‘If it is urgent, I do not refuse.’”

Divit’s hands moved as if holding something long and alive. “Garuḍa seized the middle of Vāsuki and rose. Higher and higher. Past the rim of sight. Yet half of Vāsuki still lay on the ground.” Divit folded his hands, demonstrating. “He took him doubled. Still the tail kissed earth.”

Kerpal felt a pressure behind his eyes. Divit’s outline wavered again, just a little, the robe thinning, the ribs hinted beneath like pale arcs, his face serpentine. Then the shape returned to man. Kerpal exhaled slowly. “Hallucinations,” he thought. “But why so clear?”

“Garuḍa returned,” Divit said, “ashamed. Viṣṇu rebuked him for loving his own strength. Then Śiva reached down into Pātāla.” Divit raised his arm. For an instant, the arm seemed to narrow, the wrist circling, the fingers fusing like light through water. A bangle glimmered there, then a hand again. “Vāsuki became small. A bracelet. Thus he was brought.”

Divit leaned forward. “The churning began. Poison rose first. Fire followed. Then the honey. Immortality tastes bitter at the start.”

Kerpal’s heart thudded. He stared at Divit’s face, searching for seams, for tricks of light. “Are you—” he began, then stopped.

Divit looked at him. “Do you think stories stay stories because people repeat them?” he asked. “Or because they are true enough to return?”

Kerpal’s throat was dry. “I saw you change.”

Divit’s eyes softened. “You saw what you could bear.”

Kerpal closed his eyes. The golden field returned, the serpent moving through it, whispering his name again, closer now. He opened them. The torches were steady. Divit was a man, old and thin, breathing quietly.

“Smoke more,” Divit said, offering the bowl again. “Listen. Not everything that moves is illusion. Not everything that stays is real.”

Kerpal took the bowl, hands steady despite himself, and drew the smoke in. He sat, and the room held him.

Divit’s laughter faded into the stone as he settled again, the torches breathing softly. He drew a slow circle in the air with his finger, then began, his voice lower, weighted, as though the words themselves had to be carried.

“Manasā,” he said. “Born not of womb, but of mind. Daughter of Maharṣi Kaśyapa. Manasā because she rose from thought. Or because she plays with the mind as a woman plays with silk, folding and unfolding it at will.” He glanced at Kerpal. “Or because she fixed her mind on God until nothing else remained.”

Kerpal felt the floor beneath him pulse faintly, like something breathing deep below.

“She worshipped Viṣṇu for three Yugas,” Divit continued. “Three ages of hunger, silence, and fire. Her body thinned, her bones sharpened. When Śrī Kṛṣṇa saw her, worn like the muni Jarat Kāru, he called her by that name. Jarat Kāru. She did not protest. Names are clothes. She wore many.”

Divit’s shoulders twitched. Kerpal’s eyes followed the movement unwillingly.

“Kṛṣṇa gave her what she asked,” Divit said. “Not gold. Not dominion. Siddhi. The knowledge to stand between worlds without being torn apart. He worshipped her as she worshipped him. That is how power recognizes itself.”

The light bent. Divit’s skin shimmered, not briefly now, but openly. His spine lengthened, vertebrae pressing against cloth that seemed suddenly too thin. His fingers fused, nails

darkening, curving. Kerpal's breath caught in his throat. The robe slid, and beneath it the body reshaped—scaled, glistening, limbs pulling inward. Where Divit had been, a long, low form crouched, head lifting slowly, eyes lidless and black. A serpent's skull sat atop a lizard's body, tongue tasting the air.

Kerpal did not move. His eyes burned. "This is smoke," he told himself. "This is poison in the blood." But the stone reflected the shape. The torches flickered against scales.

"Manasā is known everywhere," the creature said, the voice unchanged. "In the heavens. In the abodes of the Nāgas. On earth. In Brahmāloka. Fair as milk. Jagad Gaurī. Śaivī, because she learned from Śiva. Vaiṣṇavī, because her devotion never bent. Nageśvarī, Nāga Bhaginī —sister of serpents."

It shifted, coils scraping softly on the floor.

"She saved the Nāgas when Parikṣit burned them in sacrifice. She drinks poison and makes it harmless. Viṣahari. Destroyer of venom. Mahādeva gave her Siddha Yoga. That is why she walks freely."

Kerpal's hands trembled in his lap. He forced them still.

The creature laughed. A dry, clicking sound. "You think this is illusion," it said. "You should. That is how the mind survives."

It began to change again. Scales softened, limbs stretched, bones sliding back into place with the ease of something practiced. In moments, Divit sat before him once more, old, thin, human, the robe settling back onto shoulders that no longer bulged.

"The ancient blood runs in followers," Divit said, smiling. "My forefathers laid these stones. Their fathers before them. Thousands of years. The Serpent flows in us. We slither with its rhythm."

Kerpal swallowed hard. "You're saying… you carry Nāga blood."

Divit nodded. "A gift. Not a crown. Not everyone survives it."

Kerpal stared at the altar, at the candles burning straight and calm. "Then what did I see?"

Divit leaned forward. "What you were allowed to see."

Kerpal exhaled slowly, the smoke still warm in his lungs. He did not stand. He did not speak again. He sat there, eyes open, as the chamber breathed around him, and the line between story and flesh refused to return to where it had been.

Divit stood and placed his palm against the stone of the chamber wall, fingers splayed as if listening through it. His voice came quieter now, no longer teaching, but remembering. "This temple was raised before kingdoms learned their own names. The ancients built it for

the Nāga gods who came from inside the earth, not from sky or fire, but from pressure and depth. They were born of soil and darkness, wise in ways that do not speak loudly." The torches hissed as if answering him. "They still dwell below," Divit said. "Deep. Far below where roots end. People forgot because forgetting is easier than kneeling."

He stepped aside, revealing a seam in the stone that looked like a shadow until it was not. "There are passages," he said. "Not for walking. For seeing. The Lords are an ancient race, not beasts, not demons, but entities shaped by the Earth itself. Some outsiders call them evil because they fear what does not ask permission. Darkness frightens those who only know light." He smiled thinly. "Once, the Nāgas taught people. Some served them. Some learned. Some betrayed. Long ago, some Nāgas slithered above ground, but the air grew noisy and the world crowded, and they returned to the deep. This place remembers them."

Divit's eyes held Kerpal's. "There were unions," he said. "Between human and Nāga queen. Not stories. Blood. Offspring were born who carried the rhythm of the Serpent. Some could change. Some could hear. Some could endure." Kerpal felt a pressure behind his ribs, a tightening that made his breath shallow. "I am one line," Divit said. "There were others."

The room tilted. A heaviness poured into Kerpal's chest as if a hand had reached inside and closed. He tried to speak, to rise, but his legs folded and he fell sideways onto the carpet, breath tearing from him in a dry gasp. "This is smoke," he thought, the words thin and distant. The torches dimmed, or his sight did. Something fed on him then, slow and deliberate, drawing warmth from his bones, pulling strength like water from a well, and he slipped into blackness without striking the floor.

He came back to himself without opening his eyes. There was movement inside him, a flow like thick liquid finding new channels, warmth returning not from the outside but from within. His fingers curled, strong again. His breath deepened. Something old stirred where fear had been, not loud, not hungry, but present, settled, patient. He sat up slowly, the stone cold beneath his palms, the candles steady and unchanged.

Divit watched him from across the chamber. Kerpal swallowed and felt weight where emptiness had been. “I feel different,” he said, the words surprising him with their steadiness. Inside, another sound answered, quiet and dark, as if something had found a place to lie down and would not be leaving.

The air outside the temple had changed. It was still the same jungle light, the same mist-sweet scent clinging to the stones, but something clung to Kerpal’s skin now, a residue of breath that was not only his. He walked slowly toward the wagon, his limbs lighter than they’d been in days. Divit followed him only to the threshold.

“Thank you for the offering,” the old man said. “The poppy was worthy of sacred fire. When your road turns back this way, bring more.”

Kerpal looked once more at the pillars behind Divit, then at the statue just outside—a serpent with seven heads rising in a fan, each tongue forked in stone, eyes hollow and deep. A cold wind passed down his spine.

He climbed onto the wagon, pulled the reins, and turned the horse toward the trees. The road waited.

Two days later, the forest had thinned into dry land, the path winding through tall grass where dust hung in the air like old smoke. The sun pressed down with dull fingers, and the wheels squeaked now and then, one louder than the rest. Kerpal stopped under a crooked neem tree and unwrapped some bread. The horse grazed nearby, its mane slick with heat. Silence draped the road, but not for long.

Three men emerged from the tall grass—dusty, lean, bare arms and legs smeared with sweat. One carried a wooden club, another had a knife tucked into his belt, the third trailed slightly behind, eyes flicking between the crates and the horse.

“Where are you headed, trader?” one said.

“Just feeding my horse,” Kerpal replied, calmly folding the bread back into cloth.

“What’s in the crates?” the knife-man asked, stepping forward.

“Horse food,” Kerpal said. “Oats and salt blocks.”

The man didn’t wait. He walked to the wagon’s rear and began loosening the rope on the top crate. The lid creaked. Another leaned closer, peering in.

“Looks heavy for oats,” he muttered, and pried the lid fully open. Inside, brown bricks glistened under the linen wrapping. He reached down to touch one.

“Step away,” Kerpal said sharply. His hand moved to his belt.

The man with the knife turned. “You lying bastard,” he said, drawing the blade. “We know what this is.”

He lunged, slashing toward Kerpal’s chest. Kerpal stepped back, drew his curved sword with a swift motion, and with a violent arc swung the blade across the man’s extended arm. The limb flew free at the elbow, falling to the ground with the knife still clenched in the dead hand. Blood sprayed in a wild arc across the cart wheel.

The man screamed and collapsed, clutching the stump, eyes bulging in disbelief.

The second man charged. Kerpal pivoted and drove his fist into the man’s jaw with a brutal snap of wrist and shoulder. Bone cracked, and the man dropped instantly, mouth open, eyes rolled back, face collapsing onto the dust.

The third leapt onto Kerpal’s back, both arms locked around his neck, legs wrapping his waist. The weight pulled Kerpal sideways, but he didn’t struggle. Instead, he hurled himself backward with all his force, slamming the man’s body onto the dirt, smashing his own back down as well. A sharp, wet crunch told him what he needed—he rolled off, and the attacker wheezed, hands clawing at his own throat, windpipe caved in.

Kerpal rose, sword in hand. The man with the severed arm had crawled halfway across the road, leaving a trail of blood.

“You brought this,” Kerpal said.

“No—please—”

But Kerpal was already moving. With three sharp movements, he cut their throats one by one, clean and fast. The last of them gurgled as the blade withdrew. Silence returned, but changed. Blood soaked the road, and flies buzzed already, drawn to the new scent of death.

He cleaned the blade with a torn sleeve from one of the dead. No one spoke. Only the wind passed through the grass again.

Kerpal climbed back on the wagon and stared down the road ahead. “No more soft hands,” he said under his breath. “This road’s teeth are out.”

## Samdrup Jongkhar

The hills around Samdrup Jongkhar rolled like green backs of sleeping animals, mist clinging to the edges, the air heavy with spice and moisture. Kerpal arrived in the late afternoon, dust from the road clinging to his boots, his horse breathing hard. The Bhutanese gate loomed ahead, just as Arjun had described—painted in faded reds and golds, with two guardian lions carved into stone, each watching the other but never blinking. Beyond it, the town opened in a slow spiral of whitewashed buildings and prayer flags snapping in the wind.

He passed through without delay, driving the wagon along a market road lined with merchants shouting over piles of rice, wool, incense, and salt. Children darted through feet, dogs slept under stalls, and above it all, the sound of low chanting came from a nearby monastery.

Kerpal asked a spice vendor, “Sang Lo?”

The man wiped his hands on his tunic. “Sells jade, just up that hill. Blue awning.”

Kerpal found him leaning over a table of green stones, their surfaces smoothed to glass, the light playing inside them like captured water. Sang Lo was narrow-shouldered, face long, eyes quick.

Kerpal stepped beside him and kept his voice low. “I’m not here for jade. I carry poppy. The good kind. From fields near Patna.”

Sang Lo studied him a moment, said nothing, then motioned with a nod. “Let’s look.”

They walked to Kerpal's wagon. Sang Lo circled it once like a man testing a bull for weakness, then Kerpal untied one of the crates and broke the seal. Inside, the bricks lay tightly packed in cloth. He broke a chunk free and handed it over.

Sang Lo took out a slender pipe, filled it with care, and lit it from a long wooden match. The first inhale he held a moment. Then another, longer. After the third he leaned against the cart and closed his eyes, smiling as the air escaped his lungs.

"This," he said, opening his eyes, "is not field dirt. This is silk in the veins. I'll take ten crates. I would take all twenty, but I haven't coin for more."

Kerpal nodded. "Ten's enough. For now."

Sang Lo turned and motioned to a young boy, who ran off. Soon, he returned carrying a wrapped bundle heavy with coin and notes. Sang Lo counted it out before handing it over.

"Two thousand three hundred pounds sterling," he said.

Kerpal weighed the pouch in his hands. His eyes widened slightly, but he gave no grin. "You'll see me again, next season," he said. "With double the crates."

Sang Lo extended a hand. "Then I'll be waiting. Same gate, same place."

They shook firmly, no words wasted.

With his pockets heavy and heart settled into a quiet thrum, Kerpal wandered the market. He stopped at a silk stall where brightly dyed fabrics waved like flames in the breeze. The vendor held up bolts of fabric against Kerpal's chest, nodding approvingly.

Kerpal pointed. "That white one. And the overcoat with patterns too."

He left with a full set—loose cotton trousers, new boots, a tunic with sun-stitched borders, and a turban with ornaments. He changed beside his wagon, folding his old clothes into a rag bundle and tying them to the rear axle. The new clothes rested light on his skin. He tied the sword at his hip, the weight a familiar reassurance now.

The tavern stood near the far edge of the market, its door open, the smell of garlic and lentils drifting through the darkened interior. Inside, tables were scattered, low voices murmuring over mugs of local brew. Kerpal ordered food—rice, lentils, fried eggplant—and a tall mug of beer that foamed like a summer storm.

The tavern keeper eyed his sword. "We don't want fights here."

Kerpal chewed slowly, then said, "Only fight when I'm stolen from. Not your kind of house."

The man nodded and walked off. Kerpal ate in silence, the beer cold, the food sharp with spice. He watched the candlelight flicker on the brass fittings of the room, letting the silence of victory settle around him.

Later, he paid for a room upstairs, tucked the gold beneath the mattress, laid the sword within reach, and lay back on the woven mat. For the first time in weeks, the road didn't follow him into sleep. He breathed deep, closed his eyes, and let darkness come without resistance.

The knock came gently, almost like the tapping of fingernails against wood. Kerpal sat up on the thin mattress, the blade of his curved sword within reach. His hand moved to it as he rose. Another knock.

He opened the door cautiously, eyes sharp. A woman stood there, young and graceful, her skin smooth like fresh-washed silk, her sari modest but embroidered with fine gold thread. She smiled, her eyes catching the lantern light.

"Room service," she said softly. "From the inn."

Kerpal frowned. "I didn't ask for anything."

She stepped in lightly before he could answer further. He turned to dig through his bag, reaching for his pouch to see if he had left anything out. When he turned back, the woman had already untied her sari. It slid off her shoulders and pooled at her ankles. She stood

there, fully bare, the lamp's flame playing across her body like the shadow of a dancing cobra.

"I offer services," she said. "For men of coin. I don't come cheap. But you don't look like the cheap kind."

Kerpal stared at her a moment, jaw tight. Then he spat to the side and waved a hand.

"I have a wife," he said sharply. "And no appetite for fake warmth. Get your damn clothes and get out."

The woman raised an eyebrow, but said nothing. She bent slowly to pick up the sari, eyes still on him, and with a turn that was almost theatrical, stepped out the door and vanished into the dark hallway without another word.

Kerpal slammed the door shut. "Wretched city devils," he muttered, and slid the bolt across.

By morning, the dream of her had vanished from his mind like steam from boiled rice. He pulled the gold from beneath the mattress, counted it quickly, and tucked it back into the hidden pouch sewn into the waistband of his new trousers. Downstairs, he ate flatbread with pickled lemon and a hot stew that bit his tongue with each spoonful. Then he loaded the wagon, tied the crates tight, and snapped the reins.

The road to Trashigang was quiet. A thin fog wrapped the early morning, and the hooves of his horse thudded rhythmically on the packed soil. The wheels creaked in protest now and then, their wooden joints tired of the long journey. Kerpal leaned back in his seat, pulled out his opium pipe, and packed it slowly with practiced hands.

The first draw was soft, the second deeper. Smoke poured from his mouth and nose like breath from a dragon.

He murmured to himself, "What name should I give this?"

The smoke curled in front of his face like a question waiting to be answered.

"Naga," he said aloud. "Yes. That's what it is. It strikes like a beast. It coils. It bites. It burns through."

His eyes drifted closed for a moment, and visions began to shimmer through the haze.

A great hall of stone lit with emerald light. A woman with scales instead of skin, her eyes golden, her voice hissing something he didn't understand. Her arms pulled him closer, her mouth touched his, but it was too cold. Too perfect. The image shifted to a tunnel spiraling downward, carved with runes he could not read. Far below, something vast slept, coils pressed around stone, breath slow like thunder turned inward. Its eye opened once, just once, and Kerpal felt his lungs freeze.

He gasped.

His breath returned in shallow bursts. His heart thudded unevenly. One leg twitched, kicked once, then stilled. He gripped the reins tighter and blinked until the trees returned.

Dusk fell quickly. He found a tree with wide branches and stopped the wagon beneath it. The horse huffed, grateful for rest. Kerpal gathered some dry sticks and lit a small fire. The smoke curled upward, black as the visions still burning in his chest.

He ate from a paper-wrapped parcel—some rice and dried fish. It filled his stomach but didn't touch the weight behind his eyes.

As he lay on the grass beside the wagon, staring at the stars, he muttered, "Ten crates left. Naga will feed my name."

Then he closed his eyes, and let the night cover him.

The sun had barely lifted its head above the hills when Kerpal resumed his journey. The morning mist still clung to the trees like the ghost of breath, and the path ahead curled between ridges thick with forest. As the wagon creaked forward, the sound of birds broke against the otherwise silent road.

Then, just as he turned a bend near a bend of riverstone, three men stood in the middle of the path. Their turbans were dark and neatly wrapped, their coats patched and dusty, but each carried a curved blade at the side, and two of them had muskets slung over their shoulders. They didn't raise their weapons—just stood firm, eyes fixed on Kerpal's cart.

One of them stepped forward. "Where do you go with this wagon?"

Kerpal kept the reins steady, but his hand rested on the hilt of his own blade. "I transport a plant," he said. "One that gives visions, dreams, and sometimes answers from gods."

The men exchanged glances. The one in the center—a tall man with a thick beard and sun-burnt skin—tilted his head.

"Show us."

Kerpal dismounted, walked to the rear of the wagon, and with careful slowness undid the bindings on one crate. He pried open the top, revealing the bricks inside, dark and fragrant.

He reached in, broke off a whole block, and handed it to the central figure. "Smoke. Then speak."

The man nodded. The other two joined him as they unpacked pipes from leather satchels and filled them with practiced ease. Sparks caught, and soon tendrils of opium smoke curled upward. Silence stretched.

The three sat cross-legged now, their eyes half-lidded, mouths slightly parted. The one who had spoken first let out a long breath and murmured, “Yes... we know this. This is the same.”

Another one chuckled softly. “But stronger. Smoother. Like dreams soaked in honey.”

They beckoned Kerpal to their fire, which crackled in the shade of a nearby tamarind tree. Skewered meat sizzled above the flame, and one of the men sliced off a portion with a small blade, handing it over on a flat stone.

“Eat, traveler,” the bearded man said. “You share your gift, we share ours.”

Kerpal sat, taking the meat, chewing thoughtfully as the warmth sank into his bones.

“I’m Zain ul Abideen,” the bearded one said. “From Badakhshan, near the Pamir. We were hired to guard a caravan going west. Goods, opium, spices. Sometimes we protect the road. Sometimes...” He smiled faintly. “Sometimes we help ourselves to what’s not guarded well.”

Kerpal gave a slow nod. “You know the poppy trade well, then.”

“Better than most. Our fields are high up in the valleys. The flower grows smaller, but still rich. But in Kabul or Herat, you sell it for nothing. Coins are dry. We come east, where mouths are hungrier.”

Kerpal leaned back against his pack. “I’m from near Patna. Same curse. The East India Company gives less than dust, says what we grow belongs to them. I sold a crate once for 270 rupees. That same crate? Worth nearly 800 if you cross the right border. Here in Bhutan I sold ten crates—got 2300 sterling.”

Zain let out a low whistle, smoke drifting from his lips. “That’s gold-blood money, brother. That’s why we walk so far.”

Kerpal refilled his pipe, hands moving slow. “Trashigang is still ahead, though. The roads are thick with ghosts. Robbers, worse.”

Zain stretched his legs, his eyes half-closed in calm bliss. “For thirty rupees, we’ll walk beside your cart. That horse pulls, we’ll watch.”

Kerpal nodded once. “Done.”

Coins exchanged hands quietly. They smoked a while longer beneath the stars, wrapped in blankets and dreams, the fire crackling low.

By morning, the air was cooler, the light softer. They ate flatbread and dried meat, shared tea boiled in a dented copper pot. Zain cleaned his musket with careful hands, and the other two packed up the fire.

As they took to the road, one walked beside the horse, another slightly behind the wagon, and Zain moved alongside Kerpal.

“Next stop,” Zain said, “Trashigang. And after that, the world opens wide.”

Kerpal smiled faintly, pipe between his lips, and let the wheels turn.

The road climbed gently, then fell away, then climbed again, a slow breathing path that forced the wagon into patience. The horse kept a steady walking pace, head low, ears flicking at flies, while the three Afghans moved alongside with long, loose strides, their steps sure even where the ground broke into stone and root. Kerpal held the reins lightly and let the wheels find their own line.

“You walk slow for a mountain man,” Kerpal said after a while.

Zain ul Abideen smiled without showing teeth. “The horse walks slow. We do not.” He tapped his calf with the butt of his musket. “Sixty kilometers in a day is nothing. In Badakhshan, we walk from dark to dark. Up, down, snow biting the lungs. You learn not to argue with the mountain.”

Kerpal watched him. Zain’s breath was calm, unbroken. “How did you become a warrior?”

Zain laughed softly. “All Afghans are born with a knife in hand.”

The others chuckled. Zain went on, eyes on the road ahead. “My father was a sheep herder. High valleys, sharp rock, thin grass. I climbed before I could count. When he died, the herd became mine. Wolves took some. Winter took more. Traders paid nothing. I learned fast that guarding men pays better than guarding sheep.”

“So you took a blade,” Kerpal said.

“I took many,” Zain replied. “First for wolves. Then for men. Caravan work came after. Protection, sometimes raid, sometimes both on the same road. You learn who deserves fear and who deserves mercy.”

Kerpal nodded. “I grew rice. Same field my father grew. Water left us. Crop rotted in dust. Moneylender came with paper and smiles. There was nothing left to sell but hope.” He glanced at the crates behind him. “So I planted something else.”

Zain’s eyes flicked to the wagon. “The earth gives what it wants.”

“And takes the rest,” Kerpal said.

They walked on in silence for a time, the sound of hooves and wheels filling the space between words. Birds lifted from the brush and vanished. Zain spat to the side and tightened his scarf.

“You chose a dangerous road,” Zain said finally.

Kerpal’s mouth curved slightly. “It chose me first.”

The horse plodded forward, the men kept pace, and the road stretched ahead, narrow and waiting.

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The sun was just beginning to lean westward when Zain raised a hand and pointed toward a bend in the road where a massive boulder jutted from the hillside like a buried beast's shoulder. The path narrowed there, perfect for resting out of direct view. The trees cast long shadows, and the brush grew thick at the edges. Kerpal slowed the wagon, and the Afghans eased their packs down, stretching limbs and brushing dust from their trousers.

"We'll rest here," said Zain. "Let the horse drink, then we eat."

Kerpal nodded, pulling gently on the reins to halt the wagon by the side. But even before the dust settled, a sound snapped the stillness — a whistle, sharp and quick. Then from behind the boulder and trees, ten men stepped out, moving fast and wide, encircling the wagon in moments. They were Bhutanese — lean, wild-eyed, hands full of knives, clubs, rusted steel. Their leader stepped forward, face painted with streaks of red, a wicked blade held loose in his grip.

"Step down, friend," the leader barked. "Unload your crates. Fast. Or we'll do it for you."

Kerpal stared him down from the wagon, then reached under the seat and drew out his curved sword. His eyes were hard, steady.

"I ain't giving you anything, you rotten maggots."

The leader snarled and charged, knife flashing. But before he could close the distance, a thundercrack split the air. Zain had raised his musket and fired — the ball struck the gang leader square in the forehead, and he dropped instantly, limbs loose, eyes wide open, dead before he hit the dirt.

Then the others surged forward and the road became war.

Steel sang. Zain dropped his musket and drew his curved knife, diving into the fray with terrifying calm. One Afghan leapt onto a robber, plunging his blade three times into the man's gut in seconds. Another Afghan spun low, slicing through legs and dropping another man into the dust, then stabbed him clean through the chest as he screamed. Three dead in moments.

Kerpal swung his sword in a wide arc, and the blade found a robber's neck — the man's eyes froze as his head half-hung before he collapsed. A scream rang out as another attacker stabbed one Afghan in the leg, blood gushing down his boot. Another rushed Kerpal from behind, plunging a short blade between his ribs, just missing the spine. Kerpal gasped but turned with fury, shoving his elbow into the attacker's jaw.

Zain, drenched in sweat, moved like fire — his blade moved between bodies, dropping two more with savage thrusts, one through the heart, the other beneath the chin. The shrieks of dying men echoed through the valley.

One Afghan took a blow to the face, nose cracking loud, but he roared and tackled his attacker into the ground, fists flying, punching until teeth broke and the robber stopped moving. Kerpal elbowed another thug in the stomach, then punched his face, grabbed his ankles and swept them out from under him — the man's head struck a stone with a dull, final crack. Kerpal stood over him and drove the blade down into his chest, breathing heavy.

The last robber tried to run, but Zain caught him from behind, dragged him back by his collar, and drove the knife into his side, twisting hard. The man twitched, coughed blood, and fell still. One of the Afghans, face bleeding, walked to a twitching body and slashed it open, spilling guts onto the stones.

Silence.

The ground was wet with blood, ten bodies strewn in twisted heaps. Buzzards already circled above. Kerpal stood over his sword, dripping, one hand pressed against his bleeding back.

Zain wiped his blade on the shirt of a corpse and looked up. "You alright?"

Kerpal nodded slowly. "Back's bleeding. But I'm standing."

The Afghan who was stabbed in the leg sat against a tree, gritting his teeth as another wrapped cloth around the wound.

Kerpal looked at Zain, voice quiet. "Without you... I'd be dead."

Zain checked his blade's edge. "You'd be robbed, too."

They laughed, tired, alive.

The wounded Afghan, his leg bound tightly with strips of cloth and dried already with blood, climbed slowly onto the wagon, wincing with each step. Kerpal helped him up with a firm grip and nodded once without speaking. Kerpal tied his own wound with a piece of cloth, it was not deep. The other two walked beside the wagon, one ahead, one behind, as they took to the road again. The smell of blood still clung faintly to their clothes, and the flies buzzed over the trail they left behind, but they didn't look back. The wheels turned, slow and steady, the sound of hooves thudding against the earth a rhythm to keep the silence at bay.

A day and a half later, the hills softened into gentler curves, and the edge of Trashigang came into view. Stupas lined the ridge, and tall flags fluttered on long bamboo poles. The town spilled down the slope, layered in terraces of whitewashed homes and market stalls, the roofs glinting under the sun like black beetle shells.

Kerpal left the cart at the entrance of the town with the wounded man resting under shade and the other two watching over the crates. He walked alone into the market, searching.

He asked one man, then another, and another still. “Mr. Zhu Guo? Where is he?”

Old women shook their heads. A merchant slicing mango told him to check the far side of the square. After two hours, hot and sweating, Kerpal found a narrow alley, nearly hidden behind a cloth stall. At the end of it, almost tucked out of sight, a tall man stood with a long wooden pipe in hand, his blue coat dusty but fine, buttoned up to his throat.

“You must be Mr. Zhu Guo,” Kerpal said.

The man turned, eyes sharp beneath thick grey brows. “That depends who asks.”

Kerpal reached into his coat and pulled out a small chunk of his product, wrapped in linen. “I sell opium,” he said. “This is mine. I call it Naga.”

Zhu Guo unwrapped it slowly, examined the color, the texture, then broke off a pinch and filled his pipe. He lit it and drew deeply. After a pause, he exhaled with a long sigh, eyes half-shut.

“This is… strong,” he said. “Strong like mountain wind. You made this?”

“I grew it, processed it, walked it here. Twenty crates. I’ve already sold ten.”

Zhu smiled, teeth yellow but solid. “Then I will take the rest.”

Kerpal nodded. “Two thousand five hundred pounds sterling.”

Zhu didn't argue. He opened a long, leather case tucked behind his leg and began counting. Gold and silver coins, neatly bundled notes. Kerpal tucked the money away carefully, his hands calm, heart steady. He now carried 4700 sterling—more than he had ever touched, let alone owned.

“I will return next season,” Kerpal said. “More Naga.”

Zhu Guo nodded. “Then I’ll be waiting.”

Back at the wagon, Kerpal climbed up with slow breath. “It’s done.”

They walked the wagon to a small traveler’s tea house. Kerpal paid for food—a platter of spiced meat, lentils, and bread—and bought each Afghan a chilled drink made of cold oats, honey, and crushed ice. The three of them sat beneath an awning, out of the sun.

Zain sipped slowly. “We don’t drink alcohol,” he said. “Not our way. But opium...” He smiled and filled his pipe, striking the flint against a stone. “That’s another story.”

The smoke curled upward, sweet and bitter. One of the others leaned back with a full stomach, eyes half-shut.

“Good roads, brother,” Zain said to Kerpal. “Next season, maybe we cross paths again. Always more goods to guard.”

Kerpal raised his drink. “And always more thieves to kill.”

They parted soon after, the Afghans off to find an old friend in town, leaving Kerpal to spend the night in a quiet upstairs room in the tavern. The mattress was rough, the blanket thin, but the silence was deep and the money heavy in his satchel. He slept without dreams, the first real sleep in weeks.

Morning came early. He dressed, bathed in cold water, and walked the market streets. He bought a fine silk dress, dyed crimson and blue, and picked out delicate earrings of silver and turquoise for his wife. For his child, he bought a carved wooden elephant with rolling wheels, painted in red and gold.

## Home

By midday, he had packed the wagon, checked the wheels, and fed the horse. He climbed onto the seat, adjusted the turban on his head, and turned the wagon westward. The road back to Patna waited, long and winding. But this time, he rode it rich.

The journey back stretched across five long weeks. Kerpal crossed familiar lands that now seemed foreign, every path once painful now lighter beneath his wheels. He stopped in small towns, rested beneath banyan trees, cooked by roadside fires, and kept his sword always within reach. Nights passed beneath stars, days under the slow rhythm of hooves and creaking wheels. He smoked his pipe less, saving it for thought, and often sat in silence, watching the way the wind moved through the grass like a serpent remembering the earth.

On the sixth week, just past noon, the ridge of his village came into sight. The fields were dull brown with waiting. He saw the crooked tree where his ox used to be tied, now bare. The path narrowed into the familiar curve, and the shape of his house stood just ahead, smoke thinly rising from the kitchen fire.

He drove the wagon up into his yard and stopped, standing high on the cart, dust falling off his coat.

His wife stepped out from the house, eyes squinting into the light, confused. The man before her wore new clothes, a bright turban, his beard longer, his sword gleaming in a fine scabbard. Then the smile broke across his face—broad and crooked—and she gasped.

“Nira,” Kerpal said softly.

She ran to him. Her arms flung around his waist and they kissed long, her hands trembling. Their child came stumbling from behind, bare-footed, squealing, “Baba!”

Kerpal scooped the child into his arms, lifting him high and kissing his dusty cheek. “You’ve grown like a weed,” he laughed.

He reached into the wagon and pulled out the silk dress, the earrings, and the toy elephant.

“For you,” he said, handing the dress and jewelry to his wife. “And this—” he handed the elephant to the boy—“for the little beast.”

Nira stared at the gifts, tears filling her eyes. “Kerpal… this is… too much.”

“It’s only the start,” he said, eyes steady. “We’ll never go hungry again.”

That evening, after they’d eaten well and the house was quiet, Kerpal knelt on the earth floor with a metal box. He dug a square hole near the center, careful and quiet. When the hole was deep enough, he placed sterling coins inside a metal box, packed it tight with earth, and laid a flat stone above it. He patted it down with both palms. The rest he kept in a leather pouch tucked under the mattress.

Months passed.

When the planting season came again, Kerpal didn’t touch a shovel. He hired eight men from the village—hungry farmers, some with no land of their own—and paid them fair but low wages, more than they'd make toiling their own poor plots. Every morning they came with rolled sleeves and hope in their eyes, and they worked the poppy fields under Kerpal’s watch.

He sat on a raised stool under a banyan tree, pipe in hand, giving instructions. “Turn the soil deeper here. Keep the rows clean. Manure before the rains.”

The house changed too. A carpenter from the village was hired with two more men. They tore off the sagging roof and raised a new one with thick beams and clay tiles. A wooden floor was built above the packed earth, fitted with a hidden hatch. The walls were reinforced with brick and lime, and a small verandah added for sitting in the evenings.

He bought sacks of grain and beans, dried chilies, pickled lemons in large jars. The horse was fed daily on oats and cleaned like a creature of pride. Nira cooked with more spices now, and even the child had rounder cheeks.

One evening, as the sky bruised with violet, Nira brought him a brass cup of buttermilk. She sat beside him on the new verandah.

“Kerpal,” she said, “we have a proper house now.”

He sipped slowly, the cup cool in his hand. “Yes. A house that grows with the field.”

She looked at him sideways. “You’ve changed.”

Kerpal gave a small smile and looked out toward the land.

“No,” he said. “Now I’ve just become who I was supposed to be.”

The months folded into one another with the steady patience of work done right. The poppies rose clean and strong, their stems thick, their pods full and tight. Kerpal watched the timing closely, walking the rows at dawn and dusk, touching the pods with the back of his fingers, waiting for the right give. When the cuts were made, the sap bled slow and pale, and the workers moved like clockwork, careful hands, quiet steps. Processing followed, weeks of drying and kneading, controlled heat and patient turning. By the time the rains threatened the edge of the season, thirty-five crates stood stacked in the barn, the smell deep and sweet, the weight of them pressing the air.

Kerpal stood among them one evening, pipe unlit in his hand, thinking of the long road east and the men who paid in sterling without jokes. He thought of the Company too, their ledgers and smirks, and the way they laughed when they smelled weakness. “I’ll try them,” he said to himself. “But not cheap.” He decided then that he would not speak below two hundred sterling a chest, not for this cut.

He loaded two crates onto the wagon at dawn and drove through the village, past men who paused mid-step to watch, past women who lowered their voices. The wheels rolled on to the next settlement and then the third, larger village where the Company bought wholesale. He set the crates down in the market’s shade and waited, hands folded, face still.

A Company worker came eventually, a thin man with a waxed mustache and a notebook under his arm. He cut a sliver from the top brick, sniffed it, rubbed it between thumb and forefinger, and raised his brows despite himself.

“Good,” the man said. “Four hundred rupees a chest.”

Kerpal shook his head once. “Two hundred sterling.”

The man laughed, sharp and loud. “You think this is a joke?”

“It isn’t,” Kerpal said. “It’s the price.”

The laughter stopped. The man’s face tightened, color rising. “You’re mocking the Company.”

“I’m naming my cut,” Kerpal replied.

The worker snapped his fingers and barked for guards. Two men in uniform stepped forward, rifles slung loose. “Illegal contraband,” the worker said, pointing. “Confiscate.”

Kerpal's jaw set. The guards lifted the crates without ceremony and dragged them away. Dust rose where they scraped the ground. Kerpal did not move. He watched until the corner swallowed the boxes and the market noise filled the space they left behind.

He turned then, climbed onto the wagon, and drove home with the sound of his wheels steady and unhurried, the barn and its thirty-three remaining crates waiting in his mind like teeth behind a closed mouth.

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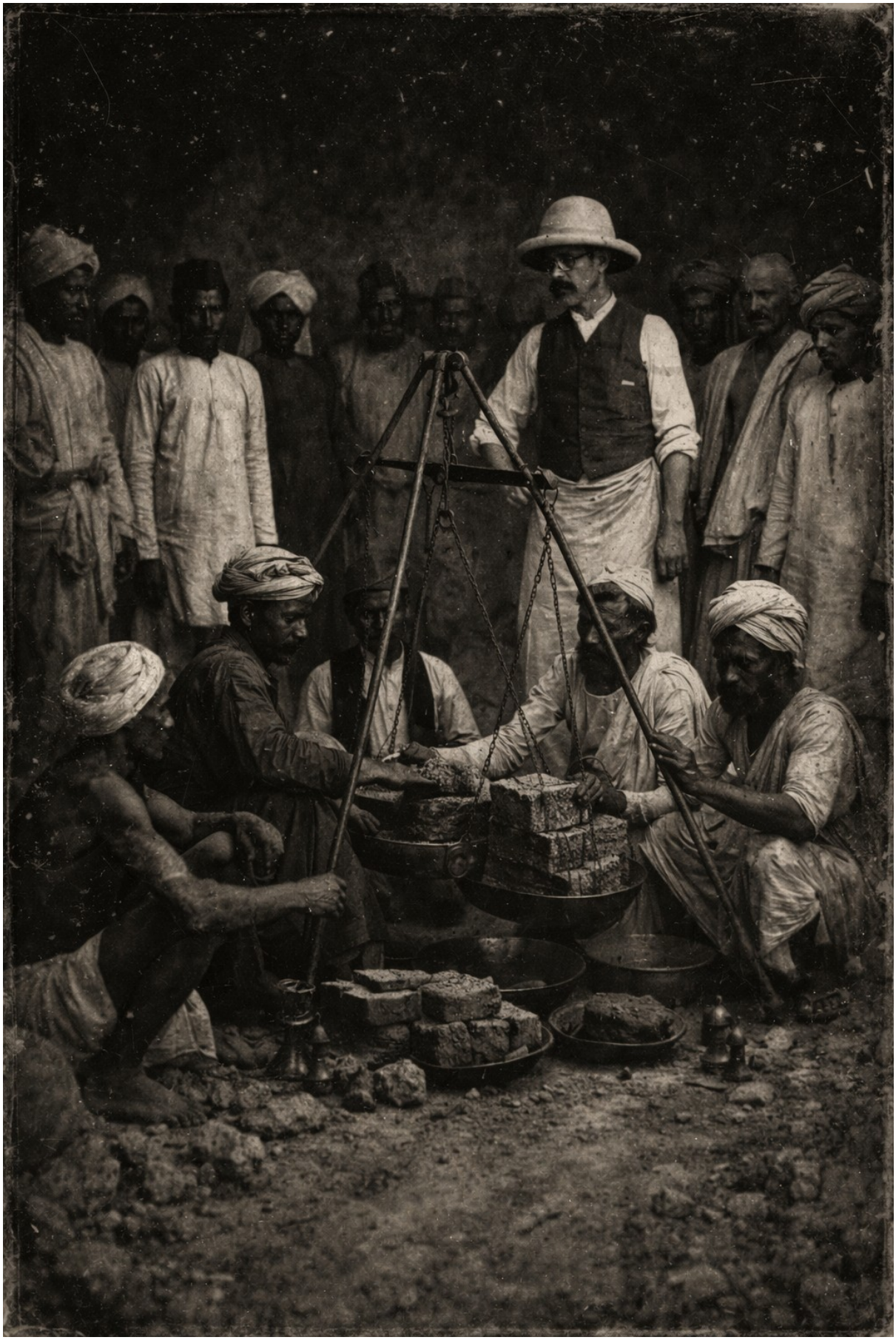

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Kerpal gripped the reins tighter than needed as he drove home, his jaw clenched, eyes narrowed beneath the cloth of his turban. Dust rose behind the wagon wheels, but he barely noticed the passing trees or fields. The weight of anger pressed into his ribs more than the road's jolts. When he reached the village, he didn't turn toward his house. Instead, he pulled the wagon around and drove straight toward Arjun's farm.

Arjun was under the mango tree, mending a rope when Kerpal stormed into the yard and jumped down.

"They stole two of my crates," Kerpal growled. "Company dogs. Took them right in front of me, called it contraband. No payment, no warning."

Arjun looked up, squinting at him, then shook his head and spat to the side. "When will you learn," he muttered, "you don't do any business with those English bastards. Not unless you're ready to be skinned and smiling while they do it."

"I knew the risk," Kerpal said. "But I didn't think they'd rob me like some roadside thief."

"They're worse than thieves," Arjun said, rising to his feet. "They've got law behind their teeth." He brushed dust off his palms and leaned in slightly. "But... they've got a warehouse. Five kilometers from here. You know the place—near the dry canal, behind the garrison field?"

Kerpal nodded.

"They stash a lot of goods there," Arjun said. "You go quiet, nightfall, maybe you'll find your crates. Break the lock, get in, drag them out."

Kerpal's eyes narrowed further. "I'll get my Naga back. They're marked — three-headed serpent, branded deep into the chest. They're mine."

Arjun chuckled low and dry. "He-he... I see you visited the temple. Welcome to the cult."

Kerpal blinked, and something stirred behind his eyes. He suddenly recalled the sun-faded red markings on Arjun's old fence post — a serpent curled tight around a trident. He had taken it as decorative once. Now he understood.

"You," he said. "You've been part of them all along."

Arjun grinned and shrugged. “We all serve something. I serve what watches beneath.”

Kerpal turned without another word. The sun was already leaning west. He drove home quick, told Nira only that he had something to handle, and packed a waterskin, and his sword. Then he hitched the horse and rode out as the sky began to turn to ash.

He reached the treeline near the Company warehouse before full darkness. The place stood behind a crumbling stone wall, its roof long and low, painted pale blue and streaked with moss. Kerpal left the cart deep in the trees, tied the horse, and crept forward on foot.

The brush crackled softly under his weight. A few lamps burned near the gate, and as he circled round to the eastern side, he spotted a guard slumped on a wooden chair, mouth half open, head tilted back — sleeping.

Kerpal moved slow, breath quiet, fingers brushing the hilt of his sword. The warehouse loomed just ahead, silent but full of what was his.

Kerpal slipped along the rear wall of the warehouse, keeping close to the stones where shadow gathered thickest. A narrow door waited there, iron-banded and locked. He tested it once, felt the resistance, then wedged the tip of his sword into the hasp and leaned his weight into it. The metal groaned, then snapped with a sharp crack. He eased the door open and slid inside, closing it behind him until the latch kissed wood.

The air within was heavy with dust and mixed scents—grain, hides, oil, spice—rows of goods stacked and tagged, the spoils of a hundred small fields and poorer hands. Crates stood shoulder-high, barrels lined the walls, sacks piled like dunes. He walked the aisles slowly, eyes scanning. Everywhere he looked he saw value shaved thin at the edge, bought for crumbs and sold for crowns. He moved deeper, then stopped. On two crates near the far wall, burned dark into the wood, coiled a three-headed serpent.

“My Naga,” he whispered.

He heaved the first crate up onto his shoulder, the weight biting into muscle, carried it to the door, and set it outside. He returned for the second and did the same, breathing through his nose, steady. When both were loaded onto the wagon and tied down, he stood for a moment in the doorway and looked back at the aisles of stacked theft. The thought rose without asking, a heat behind the eyes. This was not trade. This was taking with papers and smiles.

He tore a strip of cloth from a sack on the floor, twisted it tight, struck flint, and watched the flame take. He tossed it low, into the mouth of a crate where oil had seeped and dried. The fire caught with a soft whoof, then began to crawl. He stepped out and pulled the door nearly closed, leaving it to breathe.

From the treeline, he climbed onto the wagon and stood, watching smoke curl from the eaves. It thickened, darkened, and then flame licked along the roofline, running fast where pitch and dust had waited years for a spark. The warehouse began to roar.

A shout split the night. The guard lurched awake, eyes wild, pointing. He ran toward the trees, then saw the wagon and broke into a sprint. “You,” he yelled, voice cracking. “You, damn bandit, get off the wagon now!”

Kerpal snapped the reins, but the man reached the side and hauled him down. He hit the ground hard, face first, pain blooming as blood filled his mouth. He rolled, spat red, and came up as the guard lunged. Kerpal’s sword cleared the scabbard and went forward in one clean drive. The blade slid into the man’s belly, the shout cut off, the body folding to the dirt.

Kerpal yanked the sword free, wiped it once on grass, and climbed back onto the seat. Behind him, the warehouse burned bright and loud, a pillar of flame against the dark. He turned the wagon toward home and drove, wheels pounding, smoke following him down the road like a vow.

## On the Road

Kerpal returned home before the dawn had touched the sky. The wagon creaked into the yard beneath a fading moon. He stepped down in silence and went straight inside, where Nira sat by the hearth with their son asleep in her lap. She looked up at him without question—she had seen the fire from afar two nights earlier and knew it had not been a storm.

“I have to go again,” he said simply.

She nodded once and stood. “I’ll pack your food.”

By morning, his bags were loaded, his crates secured. He had learned the paths by heart, the villages by scent and sound. This time he avoided the main roads entirely, steering his wagon through hidden tracks and grazing fields. He passed near Begusarai, moved across the wide plains of Khagaria, dust clouding behind him. From there he crossed to Saharsa, the river waters shining dull gold under late sun. He passed Chandika Sthan, bowing once toward the temple gate, and continued through Madhepura, Raniganj, and then on to Jalpaiguri, reaching the outskirts on the edge of the second week.

The temple rose out of the earth as if it had never been built but grown — old stone, carved serpents, silent walls watching with hollow eyes. Kerpal tied the horse and climbed the steps, the smell of old incense and oil drifting like memory.

Inside, the elder was already seated near the altar, a smoking pipe in his hand. He looked up, lips curling into a smile.

“You’ve returned,” he said. “Carrying once again the plant of gods?”

Kerpal nodded. “I have,” he said, hoisting the crate off his shoulder and setting it down before the elder. “This one is yours.”

The elder touched the seal, ran his fingers over the three-headed serpent mark, and called out. Two temple servants appeared and carried the chest away without a word. The elder handed Kerpal a small cloth bag—heavy, warm—filled with gold nuggets. Then he tapped the cushion beside him.

“Sit. Smoke with me.”

They sat before the altar, flames flickering in shallow bowls, shadows slithering across the floor. They passed the pipe between them, the smoke curling upward in soft, slow spirals. After a long pause, the elder began to recite softly, eyes distant, voice even.

“Let all be blessed by the snake goddess, let everyone obtain peace.
Let all live peacefully without any turbulence.
I reverently invoke the nine principal Nag:
Ananta, Vasuki, Shesha, Padmanabha, Kambala,
Shankhapala, Dhritarashtra, Takshaka and Kaliya.
If prayed to daily in the morning, these illustrious Nag will keep
one protected from all evils and help one become victorious in life.”

The last words drifted like silk in the smoke. Then he leaned forward and began another tale, his voice lower now, weaving into the dark walls.

“There was once a farmer in a small village. Hard-working man, blessed with two sons. During one harvest, while ploughing the land, one of the boys struck the ground with his blade and killed three snakes by accident. That night, as the house lay in sleep, the mother of those snakes came. She was old and patient. She bit the farmer, his wife, and both sons. By morning, they were all dead.

“But there was one left — the farmer’s daughter. She woke and saw her family cold and stiff. She took a bowl of fresh milk, walked barefoot into the forest, and found the snake beneath a neem tree. She wept and offered the milk, pleading for mercy, for forgiveness.

“The mother snake drank. Then she whispered, ‘Your tears are clean, your heart is full. What has been done will be undone.’ And so she returned the breath to the bodies of the farmer and his kin.

“This is the law of the Nagas,” the elder said, his eyes on the flames. “They are not cruel, but they are just. Offend them, and they will take what is owed. Honor them, and they will guard your soul like fire.”

Kerpal watched the smoke dance, and though he said nothing, a chill passed through his spine, slow and thin like something curling within. The gold felt heavier in his lap. The stories were not tales to him now. They were memories in waiting.

The pipe passed between them once more, sweet smoke coiling through the air like a living thing, slow and deliberate. Kerpal leaned back, eyes half-lidded, and soon the visions began to bleed through the stone and shadow. He saw her again — the Naga Queen — tall and coiled in silver-black scales, her face both woman and serpent. She lifted her hand toward him, palm open in invitation, the other arm fading into scales as it reached for the darkness. He followed without steps, falling deeper into her gaze.

The elder rose quietly, as though the moment had been foreseen. “Come,” he said.

Kerpal blinked, the vision folding into the smoke. He stood, slow but steady, and followed the old man through the rear of the temple, down a narrow stone stair, worn and slick with age. The walls closed around them. Each step dropped them farther from the surface, farther from sound and light. At the bottom, a massive stone door blocked the passage.

The elder touched the stone, whispered something in a language that was neither Hindi nor Tibetan. The syllables sounded like breath across bone. He took a torch from a wall bracket, the flame sputtered as it came to life, and the stone door groaned open with ancient protest.

They entered a tunnel, the walls hewn from earth, not brick nor stone, just damp, cold soil held in place by time and roots. The air was thick and heavy, filled with the scent of mold, minerals, and something like snake musk. The tunnel forked, then forked again, but the elder never paused — he knew the way.

After many turns and what felt like hours, they reached a wide chamber, circular and tall, with a stone altar in its center. A statue lay curled upon it — a great serpent carved from black stone, gold-painted coils stretching along the length, emeralds for eyes that caught the torchlight and held it. The elder knelt, placed two gold nuggets on the altar, and beside them a small brick of opium.

Kerpal sat as well, silent. They waited.

Time folded.

Smoke from the torch drifted toward the ceiling and did not return. Kerpal smoked the pipe some more, his eyes fell half-closed again, his breathing shallow. He saw the sun setting,

saw the stars vanish into a void that had no end. He heard the hissing — not once, but many, layered atop each other. It rose and fell like a chant.

Then something moved.

Out from the tunnel's deepest black emerged a figure that could not be mistaken. A serpent, massive, taller than a man, black as soot, each scale a mirror of the dark. It slid forward, no sound but the hiss of its body against earth. Its eyes glowed faintly.

It came to the altar and raised its head until it stood face to face with Kerpal. He could not move. His body felt wrapped in ice, breath caught in his chest.

The serpent drew closer, its tongue flicking the air between them. Then, without warning, it reared and struck — fangs plunging into Kerpal's face, through the cheek and jaw, burning hot venom pouring into him like fire.

He screamed — the sound lost in the cavern — and fell backwards into the dust.

Darkness took him.

When Kerpal awoke, the torch was still burning low. His face throbbed with blinding pain, like his skull had cracked and fused anew. He blinked. The elder was sitting beside him, calm as still water.

"She accepted you," the elder said softly. "You screamed, but you did not die. That is the only thing that matters."

Kerpal groaned, trying to sit upright. His mouth was filled with the taste of copper and ash. "She bit me."

"She let her blood into you," the elder said. "Through the bite. Now the serpent is in you."

Kerpal's breath shuddered. Then he felt it — beneath the pain, under the crust of shock — something thrumming in his chest, behind his eyes. His hands trembled. He could smell the old stone, the musky scent of the underground, even the burn of the opium that had long since burned out.

"I feel..." he said, stopping. "Everything."

"Yes," the elder nodded. "The world is different now. You are no longer just a man. She gave you a piece of herself. A mark. A hunger. You may never be warm again."

Kerpal stood slowly. His joints didn't ache, his limbs were steady, but his skin was cold, like he had walked out of a river.

"I smell iron," he whispered.

“You’ll smell blood, lies, fear... dreams too,” the elder said. “But beware. This gift, it pulls. If you follow it too deep, there may be no return.”

Kerpal looked down at his hands. The veins beneath his skin looked darker than before. Something was in him now, something old. Something awake.

He didn’t speak again, only nodded once, and turned his gaze back toward the tunnel where the serpent had come.

At the edge of the temple courtyard, where moss clung to stone and incense smoke drifted upward like old breath, the elder placed his hand on Kerpal’s shoulder. His fingers were thin but firm, the grip of one who’d lived long and seen deeper than most men dare.

“You are welcome here always,” he said. “Come if the visions press upon you. Come if the world becomes too thin to hold your weight. Or come simply to speak. But no matter what, you must return next season with the plant of gods. We will expect it. There is the first Serpent temple in Tibet, near Potala Palace, pay a visit there once you have time.”

Kerpal bowed once, not with reverence, but with something quieter, something rooted.

Then he turned and left.

The roads ahead swallowed him. He traveled in silence, sometimes speaking to the horse but mostly to himself. His body was restless by day, but sleep fled him by night. The dark brought with it dreams that were not dreams — serpents slithering under his skin, voices hissing through the grass, the naga queen’s whisper in his ear: “Closer.”

Sometimes he went days without closing his eyes. Other times he slept sitting up in the wagon, head drooping only for minutes at a time before something inside him jolted him awake.

By the end of the week he reached Samdrup Jongkhar. The market buzzed as always, but Kerpal walked through it like a man who’d already seen what lay beneath the surface. He found Sang Lo quickly—at the same spot near the jade stall, a weathered straw hat shading his narrow eyes.

Kerpal approached, silent as a shadow.

Sang Lo looked up and smiled. “The serpent returns.”

Kerpal opened the wagon and pointed to the crates. “Fifteen. Naga.”

Sang Lo whistled softly. “You bring rain to a dry land, friend.” He took a sliver from one crate, lit his pipe, and tasted it. His head tilted back slowly. “Still strong. Still deeper than the rest.”

He counted out 3300 sterling and handed it over. “As promised. The price of dreams.”

Kerpal nodded once, tied the satchel shut, and said no more. He turned his wagon and headed up the road toward Trashigang, the air thinner with every curve, the hills rising in layers like waves turned to stone.

There, near the upper district, he found Mr. Zhu Guo as before, draped in his long blue coat, the smell of cloves and tobacco trailing him like a cloak.

“You’re late,” Zhu said, smiling. “But I forgive you.”

Kerpal dismounted. “I have nineteen crates this time.”

Mr. Zhu Guo’s brows lifted. “And all Naga?”

Kerpal tapped one of the boxes. “Every one.”

They inspected the product together. Zhu nodded with each brick, a glint in his eyes. “People whisper of this opium. They say it carries them beyond the dreams of monks and mystics. My buyers have been searching everywhere for it.”

Kerpal crossed his arms. “Two hundred fifty sterling per crate.”

Zhu didn’t flinch. “Done.” He handed over 4750 sterling, smooth and deliberate.

Then he gestured toward a wooden gate behind the market stall. “Come. We eat.”

Zhu Guo’s home was layered with color and scent—red banners fluttered from rafters, bells chimed softly from open windows. They sat beneath a lantern-lit canopy in his courtyard

where low tables were covered with dishes: steamed momos filled with pork and ginger, yak butter stew, sticky rice wrapped in banana leaves, chili cheese curry, pickled radishes, spiced lotus stems, fried river fish in sweet garlic glaze, tender slices of roasted duck glazed in hoisin, and fresh jackfruit segments.

Jugs of rice wine were passed around, and the pipe was lit again.

“You know,” Zhu said between sips, “you’ve created something rare. This Naga... it does not just numb. It opens.”

Kerpal exhaled slow smoke. “I didn’t create it. I planted it. The earth gave it power.”

Zhu’s eyes narrowed. “earth?”

Kerpal didn’t answer.

They drank late into the night, sharing laughter, quiet stories of mountains and markets, rivers crossed and guards bribed. Outside, the wind stirred the lanterns. Inside, the smoke coiled like a snake and drifted into the rafters.

The city was wide awake beneath a sky of pale blue, the mountain air thin and crisp. Kerpal wandered the market slowly, his boots stirring the dust between rows of painted stalls and hanging fabrics. Clay pots stacked like watchmen, dried herbs strung above butcher tables, bells chiming from iron hooks. He passed stalls selling copperware, incense, and bolts of Bhutanese silk dyed in deep reds and sharp yellows. He checked through amulets carved in bone, jade animals, and tools for cultivation, but nothing called to him with enough weight. Still, he moved through the market like a man trying to read a message hidden between faces and noise.

Hours passed.

Then, through the veil of foot traffic and steam from cooking pots, he saw three familiar shapes standing near a vendor selling boiled peanuts. Zain ul Abideen turned, eyes narrowing, and then smiled wide as Kerpal waved.

“Zain!” Kerpal called out, weaving through the crowd.

Zain stepped forward, arms wide. “Ah! The Naga merchant returns alive!” They clasped hands, firm and quick, and Zain nodded toward his two companions. “You remember Jamil and Basheer.”

Kerpal gave a short nod, then pointed down the alley. “There’s a tavern around the corner. Let’s get tea and smoke.”

They moved off together and soon found a quiet spot with old timber benches and a low table. The innkeeper brought a clay pot of strong black tea, cardamom rising from the steam. The men leaned in close, sharing space like they had on the long road.

Zain poured tea for all. “We just arrived two days ago. Protected a spice caravan from Paro. Bandits still move like dogs in the dark. Sorry I wasn’t out when you came through — I would have walked your wagon again.”

Kerpal shrugged and took the pipe from his coat, packed it slowly. “I carry my blade,” he said, tapping the sword at his hip. “But it’s better to have more hands when the road gets hungry.”

Zain nodded with a smirk. “A man alone is a whisper. A group, a storm.” He leaned back, eyes half closed as he exhaled smoke. “It’s good to see you made it. Too many don’t.”

Kerpal took a deep pull from the pipe and passed it to Jamil, who nodded in thanks. “You still travel the roads often?”

“Often enough,” Zain said. “But this time I leave again tomorrow. Big job. Caravan with goods going west. They pay well, and the horses are strong.”

Kerpal set his cup down. “We’ll cross paths again, I know it.”

Zain grinned and stood, adjusting his belt and wrapping his shawl. “The roads are long. We’ll find each other.”

They clasped hands once more before parting, the three Afghans melting back into the crowd, their curved knives at their waists, steps quiet but certain.

That evening, Kerpal found a better tavern near the quieter end of town. The floor was clean, the food hot, and the mattress soft enough. He paid for a room and laid down without much thought. His limbs ached from the weight of coin and memory. He did not dream.

At sunrise, the sky was pale as a new scroll. Kerpal packed his wagon, loaded the supplies, checked the wheels and the harness. The crates were gone, the money buried deep in his coat. With one last look over the rooftops of Trashigang, he climbed aboard, snapped the reins, and the wagon creaked forward toward the road that would, in time, lead him back home.

Kerpal guided the wagon slowly over a narrow dirt road, flanked on one side by a crumbling slope and on the other by a stand of tall dry brush. The horse’s hooves struck the earth with soft thuds, and the wagon creaked with the weight of supplies and the silence of the open road. The sun beat hot through the thin clouds above, the air dry, the scent of dust and distant smoke drifting faint on the breeze.

A woman lay sprawled across the road, her body twisted as if she'd fallen, her shawl tangled around her legs. One bare foot twitched slightly. Her face was turned to the side, matted hair hiding half her features. Kerpal pulled the reins, bringing the wagon to a stop. Still, he climbed down.

“Hey,” he called. “Are you breathing?”

No answer. He stepped closer.

Then came a shout, the sound of movement, and from behind a large roadside stone two men sprang out—lean, sun-darkened, and wild-eyed. One swung a club, the other held a short blade. Kerpal reacted instantly. He spun, ducked under the club, and threw a punch that landed square into the side of one robber’s head. The man dropped immediately, collapsing into dust like a bag of cloth.

The other crashed into him with full force, sending them both to the ground. Kerpal landed hard on his back, the breath punched from his lungs. The robber climbed on top, driving fists into Kerpal’s chest and jaw, each blow dull and thudding. Blood filled his mouth. He spat into the man’s face, grabbed his wrist, twisted, and kneed him in the ribs. They rolled once, then Kerpal gripped the robber’s shirt, drew his sword from his hip, and shoved the blade through the side of the man’s neck. Warm blood sprayed over his shoulder. The man’s eyes went wide, then dimmed as he slumped forward, dead.

Kerpal shoved the corpse off him and stood, wiping his face, breathing heavy. He walked to the other robber who laid on the ground and with a massive force chopped his head clean off.

But the sound of rapid footfalls drew his attention. He turned—and saw the woman. No longer sprawled, she was upright, nimble on her feet, a flash of cloth disappearing down the slope with *his* money sack clutched tight in both hands.

“Hey!” he bellowed, but she was already gone, leaping down the hillside like a goat.

He gave chase.

Kerpal leapt down the same slope, his boots thudding into loose earth. A burst of pain shot up his legs as he landed from a two-meter drop, but he didn’t stop. She was quick—crouching to pass beneath branches, slipping between boulders, her feet agile and sure. The dry shrubs scratched at Kerpal’s arms, and thorns tore at his clothes. He ducked and followed, stumbling once on a hidden root.

They reached a patch of rocks where she jumped between stone ledges, then splashed across a shallow stream. Kerpal slipped on the wet edge and crashed face-first into a flat stone. Blood burst from his nose. He snarled and pushed himself up, tasting iron and grit.

The woman looked back once and kept running. She was fast, but he was gaining.

His breath came in short bursts, heart pounding against his ribs. His feet struck the ground harder with each step. She turned sharply around a tree and Kerpal cut the angle, nearly colliding with her as he surged ahead.

With a final lunge, he launched himself through the air. His arms stretched wide, and he crashed into the back of her legs. The woman cried out as they both went tumbling. She hit the ground first, the money sack flying from her grip, tumbling into a patch of grass.

Kerpal landed atop her legs, rolled to the side, then scrambled to his knees.

“Damn you’re fast like a squirrel,” he panted. “Stop running, you little shit!”

She tried to crawl away, face twisted in panic and rage. He drove a single hard fist into her temple. Her body went limp.

He stood, bruised, blood running down his face, sweat soaking through his tunic. He walked over, grabbed the sack of money, checked it. All there. He gave the woman a glance, spit beside her head, then turned back toward the slope, dragging his body slowly up toward the road.

His chest ached. One tooth felt loose. But his coin was back in his hand, and his sword still at his side.

By the time he reached the wagon, the sun had begun to sink. He climbed onto the seat without a word, snapped the reins, and moved on.

Kerpal travelled for five weeks, taking brakes to sleep and eat. In a few days he pulled the reins, slowing his wagon as the familiar silhouette of his village came into view. The path he had ridden countless times now felt heavier beneath him. His limbs ached from weeks on the road, and his eyes stung with dust and fatigue, but there was a quiet tension tightening his spine as he neared home.

Dinesh's house stood ahead—door hanging open, smoke curling lazily from the chimney, yet something was wrong. A British officer stepped out from the doorway, flanked by two armed sepoys. The officer was tall, pale-skinned, and wore a dark blue coat with golden trim. His gloves were spotless. Kerpal stopped his horse behind a tree and waited, eyes locked on the men as they walked casually down the lane and mounted their horses. They disappeared down the road without looking back.

When the dust settled, Kerpal dismounted.

He pushed the door open, and the silence inside was unbearable. Dinesh lay face down on the floor, blood congealed around his throat, which had been sliced open cleanly. His eyes were half open, frozen in a lifeless stare. A simple man, a farmer like himself once. A friend from muddy childhood days when they played in river water, stole mangos, and shared their first smoke.

Kerpal stood over the body, fists clenched, chest rising with a slow, boiling breath. "Dinesh..." he muttered. "You didn't deserve this."

Outside, a neighbor with a shawl over his shoulders approached carefully, standing just beyond the door.

"They beat him for an hour ," the man said softly. "They said he was part of some illegal trade, that he might've had a hand in the warehouse burning... but Dinesh barely left the village. He didn't even own a cart."

Kerpal turned, eyes sharp. "They murdered him?"

The man nodded once. "They needed someone to punish, to show they're in control. He was easy. They dragged him out, tied him up, and made him confess. Then the officer... he did it himself."

Kerpal's jaw locked tight. "What's the name of this dog?"

"Mr. Perkins," the neighbor replied. "He's the trade overseer. Lives in Patna. I've seen his place once, near the east garrison road. Big white house with a black iron gate. I went there to pay rice tax two years ago."

Kerpal stared at the floor. "Damn them," he said, voice low. "Damn them all."

He walked out without another word.

By the time he reached his home, his wife saw his face and said nothing. She took the horse without asking and led it to water. Kerpal walked to the barn, opened the cupboard where the jars and bundles of herbs were stored. He pushed aside bundles of dried turmeric and cumin until he found what he was looking for—a small paper pouch tied with black string. Poison for the rodents in the barn. He pocketed it.

He returned to the house, kissed his child's head in silence, and looked once at his wife. "I must go," he said. "Someone's waiting for me in Patna."

She didn't ask questions. She never did when his eyes looked like that.

That night, Kerpal fed the horse, checked his sword, and packed only what he needed—a flask, food for three days, the pouch of poison, a dark shawl. The moon was thin and high. He waited in silence beside the house until the village had gone to sleep.

Then he mounted the horse bareback, no wagon, and rode into the night.

Night cloaked the city of Patna in silence and thick shadow. Kerpal moved like a phantom through the side alleys until he reached the tall wall that bordered Mr. Perkins's compound. The white colonial house loomed beyond, dimly lit by a single lantern near the front steps. He crouched by the wall's edge, waiting, listening. No footsteps. No dogs. Only the rustle of leaves and the occasional creak of wood in the night air.

He scaled the wall quickly, gripping the gaps between bricks with quiet precision. At the top, he swung his leg over and dropped silently into the yard. The grass was cool beneath his feet. He moved low, crossing the back garden, passing under the shadows of a neem tree. The kitchen window had been left unlatched—sloppy habit.

Inside, the house was quiet. A clock ticked somewhere in the darkness. Kerpal moved with calm certainty and soon found the pantry door, opened it. The scent of dried meat, flour, and vegetables met him. On the second shelf sat a tall, thick bottle of milk. He took it down, untied the small pouch of rodent poison from his belt, and emptied it all into the bottle. White grains sank and vanished into the liquid. He shook the bottle for a long time, until there no trace. Then he returned it exactly as it had been. Everything clean. Silent.

He left the way he came—climbing the wall, disappearing into the dark.

Hours later, Kerpal lay in his own bed at home, wrapped in stillness. His body twisted in sleep, sweat on his neck. Then his eyes opened.

His breath came shallow. The air felt cold on his skin, but he was not shivering. His lips parted, and a low hiss whispered out without his control. He sat up, legs swinging down to the floor, and walked to the corner of the room, where an old, streaked mirror leaned against the wall.

He stared at his reflection.

His pupils were narrow vertical slits, glowing faintly in the darkness. Not round. Not human. He leaned closer and whispered. “Serpent in me.”

He stood there for a long time, unmoving, watching the thing he had become.

Just before dawn, sleep took him again.

In the morning, he rose early. The world outside had begun to wake, birds shifting in the trees, a rooster calling faintly. He found Nira in the kitchen, already preparing water to boil.

“Nira,” he said. “You have to go. No, not tomorrow. Today.”

She looked up, worried. “What happened?”

“It’s not safe anymore. The Company is stirring like a nest of ants. Dinesh is dead. They’ll be hunting more. I don’t want our son growing up beneath their boots.”

Her face went pale. “Then where?”

“Trashigang,” he said. “Take the boy, go today. Go through the village, catch a carriage. You’ll have money for a place, a good one. Buy a proper apartment. Something with a view of the market road.”

She frowned, brow creased. “And you?”

“I’ll stay to oversee the fields, make sure the planting is done right. I’ll leave the rest with two of the workers, trust them to manage it. I’ll follow you soon.”

Nira stepped forward. “You swear?”

He looked into her eyes. “Ofcourse dear. I meet you in 5 weeks in Trashigang market corner.”

She stared for a long moment, then nodded slowly.

He took a pouch from the shelf and pressed it into her hand. “This is more than enough. Take the good shawl and leave before noon.”

“I’ll pack now,” she whispered, then turned away.

Kerpal watched her go. Something in him moved, not guilt, not fear—something older. Something deeper. A quiet voice that did not belong to him. It hissed in his bones, a voice from below the earth.

Kerpal crouched by the wooden floor and lifted the loose planks one by one. The early morning light streamed through the cracks in the wall, casting faint lines across the dirt beneath. He reached into the hollow space and pulled out the heavy iron box. The hinges creaked softly as he opened it. Inside lay stacks of notes and coins, carefully wrapped cloth

bundles and pouches of foreign silver. He took out the last of the money, counting by habit. He tied it all together with a thick cotton rope and placed it in his leather bag with the rest. Nine thousand pounds sterling now—what he had earned through blood, blade, and poppy sap. One thousand was already in Nira's hands, sent away with the hope that no English boot would ever crush her path.

He stood, washed his hands, and packed a few spare clothes into a cotton sack—two shirts, a wool shawl, his long knife and one copper cooking pot. He took the smoked chickpeas from the kitchen shelf, some dried fish, and three flasks of water. He hoisted a bag of his poppy seed on the wagon. Outside, the sun rose gold above the fields. The men were already there, gathering near the edge where the dry stalks of last year's plants lay scattered.

He walked to them, raising his hand.

"I'll be leaving soon," he said. "I've taught you the work. You know what months to seed, how to till, how to dry the sap into paste, when to roll the bricks. I'll return in early November. If I'm late, keep the bricks in the barn until I come."

One of the older men, Ratan, nodded. "We'll do it proper. Your method brings gold."

"I'll send word if anything changes," Kerpal added. "Until then, treat the fields like your own. I'll pay you for your work after harvest. Just make sure everything's done right."

Then he walked to Arjun's house, heart beating slow and deliberate. The road to his old friend's hut curved behind a grove of tall banana trees, their leaves stirring faintly in the morning wind. Arjun sat by the side, smoking his pipe, hammering at something wooden with a curved chisel. When he saw Kerpal approach, he raised an eyebrow.

"You leaving again?" Arjun said, not pausing his work.

Kerpal crouched next to him. "I'm going. The Company's been sniffing around too close, and they slit Dinesh's throat like he was nothing. They'll come asking about me."

Arjun's hands stilled.

"They won't hear it from me," he said. "Far as I know, you disappeared into the forest moons ago."

Kerpal nodded. "Good."

He untied a smaller pouch from his belt and handed it to Arjun. The weight was unmistakable—silver and coin.

“When I settle in Trashigang,” Kerpal said, “I want you to keep an eye on the fields. Visit once or twice every few months. If workers slack off, kick their lazy asses. I’ll pay you a wage starting next November.”

Arjun leaned back, pipe smoke curling from his lips. “Alright. I’ll do it. You’ve earned this quiet, Kerpal... but don’t fool yourself. The Company doesn’t forget faces.”

“I don’t forget blood,” Kerpal said. “We’ll see who remembers better.”

They sat in silence a moment longer, wind tugging gently at the leaves, before Kerpal stood.

He nodded once. “Tell no one.”

Arjun nodded in return. “No one.”

Kerpal strapped the last sack to the cart, securing it tight beneath the rolled wool mat. The early light crept across the thatched roofs of the village, painting his home in pale gold one last time. He brushed his hand along the horse’s neck, then tightened the reins and climbed onto the seat. With a slight tug and a whistle, the wagon began to roll forward, wheels creaking over the dry path. As the village slipped behind him, not a soul stirred. He didn’t look back.

The road stretched long and silent through the plains, into the hills, and up toward the edge of the mountains. For five weeks he moved, taking quiet paths, stopping only when needed. Through Begusarai, past Khagaria and Saharsa, lighting his pipe in the evenings by the roadside and sleeping under trees with his sword always within reach. Each mile brought him closer.

Finally, Trashigang rose before him in mist and early light, nestled between slopes and terraces. He drove the wagon into the city’s center, eyes scanning the market corner until he saw her—Nira, wrapped in a pale shawl, standing beside a fruit stall. She turned, caught his eyes, and smiled. He dropped from the wagon and she rushed into his arms, holding him tight.

“I found us a good place,” she said, voice breathless. “In the center, second floor, stone walls and even a small balcony.”

“Just what I’d hoped for,” Kerpal answered, brushing dust from her cheek. “Now we live like people.”

They walked home together, hand in hand, as the cart creaked behind them.

Far away, in the city of Patna, Mr. Perkins stumbled from his bed, sweat pouring from his collar despite the morning chill. He moved quickly, hungry, dry in the throat. He opened the pantry door, grabbed the glass bottle of milk and guzzled it, half the bottle gone in seconds, wiping his mouth on his sleeve as he closed the door. He groaned, staggered upstairs, but

halfway up he stopped, clutching his gut. His mouth opened, bile rising, and a retch ripped from his throat. In the next hour, he writhed in pain, foaming at the mouth, body twisting in violent cramps. His eyes rolled back. By the time the servant found him, he lay dead, twisted like a rag on the polished wooden floor.

Back in Trashigang, life unfolded differently.

Kerpal and Nira went out each evening, strolling through the lanes of the city, eating rice steamed in lotus leaves, fried dumplings, spiced greens and roasted pork dipped in thick soy. They bought soft cloths from Chinese vendors, sweetmeats from Indian ones. Sometimes they visited Zhu Guo in the evenings, drinking hot rice wine and smoking opium in his courtyard under hanging red lanterns.

Zhu Guo would laugh and slap Kerpal's back. "Your Naga bricks have turned half of Bhutan into dreamers," he'd say, raising a cup. "Next time, bring more."

Kerpal smiled, but his eyes sometimes wandered past the rooftops, toward the fading line of the mountains.

One night, sitting on the balcony with Nira asleep inside, Kerpal lit his pipe and stared into the stars.

He whispered, "He said I would feel it. The pull."

The ember of the pipe flared red. In his ears echoed the old man's voice, a memory dragged from deep within the smoke:

"When the serpent breathes through you, you must go to its source. Tibet. Near the Potala. That's where it began."

Kerpal nodded to the wind.

"I will go," he said softly. "Soon."

Months passed like clouds over the valley. Kerpal stood on a ridge outside Trashigang, gazing at the sloping land that now belonged to him. He had bought the plot outright—nearly twice the size of his old fields near Patna, with a wide barn already built, and a small stream trickling at the edge of the trees. The mist here was soft and the winds silent. No Company men, no taxes, no inspections. He was free to shape this land into whatever he pleased.

Zhu Guo had been the one to help secure it. One afternoon in his opium-scented parlor, Kerpal handed him a pouch of sterling coins and said, "I want land that's mine. Quiet land."

Zhu smiled, "In these parts, quiet is still possible. I'll send someone to speak with the elders."

Soon, the land was his.

Kerpal visited Zhu's stall days later, inspecting baskets filled with ivory-colored poppy seed. "It's good seed," Zhu said, holding one between his fingers. "Strong. Grown in the north. You'll have your fields blooming like dreams."

"Yes I take some of it, but I have my Naga seeds. I'll need tools too," Kerpal said. "And workers."

Zhu nodded toward a man selling knives. "Go ask around. Plenty of men here know the work."

Kerpal found them easily—men who had once grown poppy before. They stood near the stone walls of the market, smoking slow and quiet.

"You know how to grow?" Kerpal asked.

A man with a twisted ear nodded. "20 years. I know how to lance a pod cleaner than a barber shaves a head."

Another added, "I'll work. My hands are still strong. Pay us fair, we'll fill your barn."

"I'll pay better than fair," Kerpal said. "We start when the soil speaks."

The plans were in motion.

As the months rolled by and the sun began shifting south, November drew near—the time when planting began. Kerpal packed food and rode east. He hadn't seen his old village in months, but he wanted one last harvest there before the land soured entirely. He rode fast, hoping the worst had blown over.

But as he neared the edges of his former fields, his heart went still.

From behind the tree line he crouched, watching. Three Company men stood in the middle of the dry fields, striking a group of farmers with canes and rifles. One man, older, staggered forward, trying to lift his tool. A British soldier cursed, drew his sword, and slashed down hard. The man dropped, blood soaking the dirt.

Kerpal's breath froze.

"This land is finished," he whispered. "They've claimed it."

He turned, not daring the road, and led his horse through the trees, weaving carefully between roots and rocks. As soon as the road opened, he climbed up and kicked the horse into a gallop. Dust flew behind him. He only stopped for food and sleep, until the blue roofs of Trashigang came into view.

When he reached his house, Nira met him at the door. "You're back early?"

Kerpal pulled off his cloak, jaw clenched. “There’s nothing left there. Company’s taken the fields. They killed a man in the open. I watched him die.”

Nira touched his arm. “Then we never go back.”

Kerpal looked toward the horizon, then down at his dusty boots. “No. Now we build everything here. This is where we stay.”

The November air came sharp and dry as bone, perfect for the turning of soil. Kerpal stood barefoot in the middle of his new land, a burlap sack pressed tight in his grip. He opened it slowly, dipping one hand in, letting the small black seeds trickle between his fingers. The first of his Naga strain—born from his own hands, passed through fire and visions, blessed in smoke and blood.

"Plant these first," he told the workers, who stood in a row with baskets and tools. "This goes in the center. Let it grow like a heart beating outwards."

He saved the outer acres for Zhu Guo’s seed—pale and dense, from the northern hills. “We try it, yes,” he said, handing the sack to Ranu, his field overseer. “But the soul of the field is mine.”

The work began at once. Dozens of hands moved in rhythm, drawing furrows, dropping seeds, covering them with a flick of the wrist. Kerpal bought cows and built pens on the far side of the land, their manure now wheeled to the fields in handcarts, spread carefully, mixed deep with the soil.

“Cows eat well,” said one worker, patting a thick-bellied bull. “They’ll give us gold from their guts.”

Kerpal grinned. “Then feed them like kings.”

As weeks passed, the fields changed. The wind carried the scent of wet soil and green growth. By midwinter, the land began to bloom. Poppies spread like fire across the hills, their heads swaying in red, white, and cream—blooms as soft as dreams, but heavy with wealth. The Naga strain rose tallest, deep red and fierce, petals curled like flames.

Kerpal stood at the edge of the ridge with Nira beside him. The child ran ahead between rows, laughing, reaching out to catch the falling petals.

“It’s beautiful,” Nira said, tucking her scarf tighter against the wind. “Like a painting.”

Kerpal exhaled slowly, eyes scanning the fields. “This is the best land I’ve ever owned. Not just because it grows, but because no one can take it from me.”

She looked at him. “Do you miss the old place?”

He shook his head. “I left bones there. Old ghosts. No... I don’t miss it. This is where we begin again.”

They walked slowly along the edges of the plantation, Kerpal pointing at the patches where different seeds had taken root. “This section here, with the white heads—that’s Zhu’s. Grows quick, but not as strong. Mine... mine is darker. Slower, but it whispers.”

Nira gave him a sidelong glance. “You speak like the fields are alive.”

He didn’t answer at first. A breeze stirred the rows, and somewhere in the sound of moving stalks, he thought he heard the hiss of a serpent’s breath.

“They are,” he said at last. “Alive... and watching.”

At night, after meals and laughter and walking through markets under colored lanterns, Kerpal sat alone on the stone balcony of his home. Beneath his skin, he felt a hunger he could not name. His flesh tingled at dusk, his breath slowed during dreams. Something was rising in him again. Not opium. Not coin. It was older.

His thoughts returned to the elder’s words—Potala Palace, Tibet. The first temple. The root of the Nagas.

"I must go," he whispered, staring into the dark.

But not yet. First, the harvest had to come. First, the poppies must bleed.

The silk curtains swayed gently in the afternoon breeze, casting rippling shadows across the polished stone floor. The home was wide, built in a curve that opened to a garden of flowering mango trees and pomegranate bushes, their fruit heavy and ripe. In the center of the courtyard, a carved marble fountain trickled water over jade stones, catching the light like shattered glass. Nira sat in a cushioned chair beside the fountain, her feet bare, toes dipped in the cool water, her dress a deep green silk that shimmered like beetle wings.

Kerpal stepped onto the veranda, his beard neatly oiled, rings glittering on his fingers, the embroidered hem of his tunic trailing just above his sandals. In one hand he held a silver plate with fresh honey cakes and spiced almonds.

“I brought your favorites,” he said, offering the plate.

Nira smiled and took a cake, biting into it. “You always bring my favorites. Even when I don’t ask.”

“Because I remember things. Things that matter.”

She leaned her head against the stone column. “You didn’t use to. Not when we had holes in our roof and were eating boiled roots.”

Kerpal chuckled and sank into the cushioned bench across from her. “When we had holes in the roof, I was busy cursing the ox. Now I have workers, a cook, a merchant from Calcutta asking if I want gold coins or silver when I sell.”

Nira reached over and took a piece of almond from his plate. “You still curse. I heard you this morning yelling at the tailor.”

“That man stitched the sleeve wrong. How does a sleeve betray a man?” Kerpal laughed, leaning back and stretching out his legs. “No more stitched lies. Only silk truth.”

In the distance, a flute played. Their son ran past the fountain chasing a rooster, laughing, barefoot, his tunic flapping like wings.

Nira’s voice turned quiet. “Do you ever feel... strange?”

Kerpal tilted his head. “Strange how?”

She looked at him. “You go silent sometimes. Not in anger, not in worry. Like something’s moving inside your thoughts. I see it in your eyes. When you smoke. When you look at fire.”

Kerpal rested his hand on hers. “There’s something in me, yes. But it doesn’t harm me.”

Nira stared at him a moment, then said, “You are not the man I married.”

“I’m not,” he said. “That man died hungry in a dry rice field. You’re married to someone richer, sharper, colder maybe. But everything I have now, I built for you and our son.”

She looked down. “Don’t become something I cannot speak to.”

He stood and kissed the top of her head. “You can always speak to me.”

Then he turned and walked across the courtyard, past silk screens and carved walls, toward the smoke curling from his pipe room. The afternoon sun lit the garden in gold, and laughter still echoed under the mango trees.

## Tibet

The morning mist curled over the rooftops of Trashigang like a ghost reluctant to leave. Kerpal stood in the courtyard of his home, buckling the leather straps of his saddle. His horse, a tall black stallion with silver in its mane, pawed the ground with impatience.

Nira approached him quietly, her hands clutching a woven shawl. "You are truly going?"

Kerpal nodded, checking the sword at his side. "Yes. It’s time. I need to see the root, the source. The first temple."

She looked into his eyes.  "And you’ll return?"

He touched her cheek. “I will be back by harvest. You have my word. This trip… it’s not for trade. It’s for understanding.”

Their son ran up and hugged his leg. Kerpal ruffled the boy’s hair, kissed his head, then climbed onto the saddle. With a final glance, he said, “Look after the fields. Look after each

other." Then he galloped off into the morning, the hooves of his horse echoing down the stone-paved roads, vanishing into the east.

It took a week of rugged riding to reach the cold barrens of Comai . The mountains loomed like frozen gods, their peaks veiled in cloud. The roads were narrow, stony, winding through dangerous switchbacks. Once, a sudden storm threw his horse sideways on a gravel slope, and Kerpal fell hard, slamming his hip on a jagged rock. He cried out but gritted his teeth, pulling himself back into the saddle.

He rode alone through barren lands, with only the wind and the screech of distant birds for company. There were no villages. No travelers. Only snow-dusted passes and valleys filled with ancient silence.

Two weeks later, bruised and aching, Kerpal crossed into Gonggar , where the terrain began to open. Wide plains rolled out before him like parchment, and in the distance, towering against the sky like a layered crown, rose the white and red monolith of the Potala Palace.

He reached the city gates by dusk, dismounted, and walked his horse through the bustling square. Monks in orange and crimson robes moved like currents around him. Pilgrims spun prayer wheels. Smoke curled from incense altars.

At the Palace entrance, he spoke to one of the elder monks.

"I seek the first Naga temple," Kerpal said.

The monk, with eyes like melted ice, peered into him for a long moment. Then he stepped aside. "Come with me," he said in Tibetan-accented Hindi.

They moved into a quiet stone corridor.

"How do you know of the serpents?" the monk asked.

"I've seen them," Kerpal answered. "In dreams, and in blood. I carry their mark."

The monk nodded slowly. "There is a path," he whispered. "Northwest of here, through the high ridge. There is no road. Only memory. The temple lies buried in the bones of the mountain."

Kerpal bowed. "Thank you."

Before leaving, he made a stop in the Potala Library—a vast labyrinth of scrolls and manuscripts older than any empire. The scent of leather and old ink filled the air. He asked a young monk for any writings on the old serpent temple.

An hour later, the monk returned with two scrolls: *The Mahāvamsa* and *Manimekalai*. The pages were delicate, filled with ancient Pali and Tamil, translated into Tibetan and Sanskrit. The elder monk read aloud:

“The old temple was built before human fathers. First men went there to bow and pay deep respects to the coiled ones. The Naga people, the ancient race of underground beings were first said to have come from inside the temple, the temple itself is said to have been built by the Nagas themselves. “

Kerpal leaned in, listening.

“Then there was a time thousands of years ago, when the humans became afraid of the Nagas and started to hate them, evil things happened in nearby villages, human babies disappeared, later many grown ups vanished. Some people were still worshipping and moved to live in the temple, never visiting the human villages again, these men became known as Naga people. “

“It is said that the Nagas disappeared deep underground but the men who went to live with them mated with female Nagas and transformed. The Naga people were also feared and they never left the temples, they gathered food around it. It was reported that some villagers still went mysteriously missing.”

The monk paused, then opened another scroll, and began to read from a description of Adishesha, the king of serpents in the underworld:

“During the night the light of the moon is not utilised for its coolness but only for illumination. Since that passes away is not taken notice of by the Nāgas who enjoy with gaiety the foodstuffs and the edibles they consume and the great beverages they drink. Nor are Danujas and others aware of it. “

“O brahmins, the forests, rivers, lakes, and lotus ponds, the cooing of the cuckoo and other sweet birds, the pleasing skies, the unguents and the continuous notes and sounds of musical instruments such as the lute, flute and Mṛdaṅga drums, O brahmins—all these and other beautiful things are enjoyed by virtue of their good luck by Dānavas, Daityas and Nāgas residing in Pātāla. The Tāmasī form of Viṣṇu, named Śeṣa is beneath the lower regions. “

“Daityas and Dānavas are not capable of recounting his good qualities. He is honoured by Devas and celestial sages. He is spoken of as Ananta. He has a thousand hoods and he is clearly bedecked in Svastika ornaments devoid of impurities. He illuminates all quarters by thousand jewels on his hoods.”

Kerpal felt cold sweat on his back.

The monk closed the scroll and looked at him.

“You seek the Naga,” he said. “You walk a dangerous road.”

“I’ve walked it before,” Kerpal said. “And I’ll walk it again.”

The monk nodded slowly. “Then you must go alone. The old path begins where no map goes. Only dreams remember it now.”

Kerpal bowed, clutching the words in his chest like fire.

He would find the temple.
He would descend.
And he would meet the old blood again.

The path began as a scar in the rock, narrow enough that Kerpal had to dismount and lead the horse by the reins. Wind tore at him from above, carrying sleet and dust, and the sky pressed low and gray. For days the mountains tested him. Snow fell without warning. Stones slid underfoot. At times the horse reared and snorted, eyes white with fear, pulling hard to flee back the way they had come. Kerpal dug his heels in, wrapped the reins tight around his wrist, and spoke low into the animal’s ear until it stilled. “Easy. We go forward,” he murmured, more to himself than to the horse.

On the third day, near dusk, he saw the narrow descent the elder monk had spoken of, almost invisible unless one knew where to look. It wound downward between jagged stone walls, a path shaped more by time than by hands. Kerpal tied the reins short and began the descent on foot, hours passing as the light faded. At the bottom, half-swallowed by earth and shadow, stood the temple. Its outer walls were cracked and broken, reliefs worn smooth by centuries, serpent forms barely visible beneath moss and lichen.

He tied the horse to a stone post and entered.

Inside, the air was warm and heavy. Candles burned along the walls, their flames steady despite the drafts. Several figures in dark robes stood in a circle, chanting in a language Kerpal did not know. The sound vibrated in his chest, low and rhythmic, like breath drawn through a long tunnel. He stepped closer to one monk and stood beside him. The chanting faltered.

The monk turned his head slightly. “I was expecting you.”

Kerpal’s mouth was dry. “How did you know I was coming?”

The monk’s eyes reflected candlelight. “Because you were already here,” he said, and gestured with a thin hand. “Come.”

They moved to a stair hidden behind a fallen pillar and descended. The darkness thickened. The monk lit a torch, and its light revealed an underground chamber cut directly from stone. At its center stood an altar. Upon it lay a human body, young, still, prepared with care rather than violence.

The monk stopped beside him. “Eat,” he said simply. “I know you are hungry.”

Kerpal's breath caught. Something surged up from deep inside him, older than thought, sharper than fear. His hands trembled once, then steadied. He stepped forward. The act itself passed without words, without struggle, driven by an instinct that felt both foreign and inevitable. When it was done, he moved back and sat on the stone floor, spine straight, eyes unfocused, the chamber quiet except for the torch's soft crackle.

The monk sat beside him and began to chant again, the same low cadence as above, the sound winding through the room like something alive. Kerpal closed his eyes. The hunger eased, replaced by a heavy stillness, and in that stillness something inside him settled deeper, as if it had finally found the place it had been seeking all along.

The torch burned low by the time the monk's chanting slowed and thinned into breath. He sat cross-legged beside Kerpal, eyes fixed on the altar's darkened stone, and began to speak in a voice that sounded older than the walls.

"Before men counted seasons, before names learned to cling to faces, the Nāgas ruled the depth between roots and bone. They were not born from sky or flame, but pressed into being by weight and patience. When the earth closed upon itself, they learned to move where stone yielded. They taught the first walkers how to listen to ground and water. They asked for nothing but remembrance."

The monk lifted a finger, tracing a coil in the air. "Then men learned fear. They learned to name the dark as enemy. They broke the old agreements and burned the paths that led down. The Nāgas withdrew. Those who followed them did not return. They shed what could not survive below. They kept what could."

Kerpal listened without moving. The room seemed to breathe.

"The blood chooses," the monk said quietly. "When hunger answers hunger, the old skin loosens."

A heat crept along Kerpal's spine. His jaw tightened; breath hissed through his teeth. His pupils narrowed, drawing into thin black slits. He swallowed and felt his tongue thin, lengthen, then part along its seam. His shoulders hunched as a tearing sensation spread across his back; skin loosened there, lifting like wet cloth. He braced a hand on the stone as muscle shifted beneath, the bones of his head pressing, reshaping, the crown stretching forward.

He exhaled sharply. The skin along his back split and slid, peeling away in heavy sheets. His legs shuddered and drew together, the joints softening, fusing, lengthening into a single powerful column. Scales rose where hair had been, catching the torchlight in dull bronze and black. He slid forward, leaving the emptied human skin collapsed on the floor like a discarded garment.

The monk stood and crossed to the far wall. With both hands he pressed a hidden seam. Stone ground against stone and an ancient door opened inward. Beyond it yawned a tunnel, earth-walled and descending, cool air flowing out like a held breath released.

Kerpal lifted his head. His new body held the floor without effort. He faced the opening, still, tasting the dampness, the minerals, the deep.

“Go,” the monk said, not unkindly.

Kerpal did not answer. He turned and slid into the darkness, the sound of scales fading down the tunnel until the door closed and the torch guttered, and the mountain kept its silence.